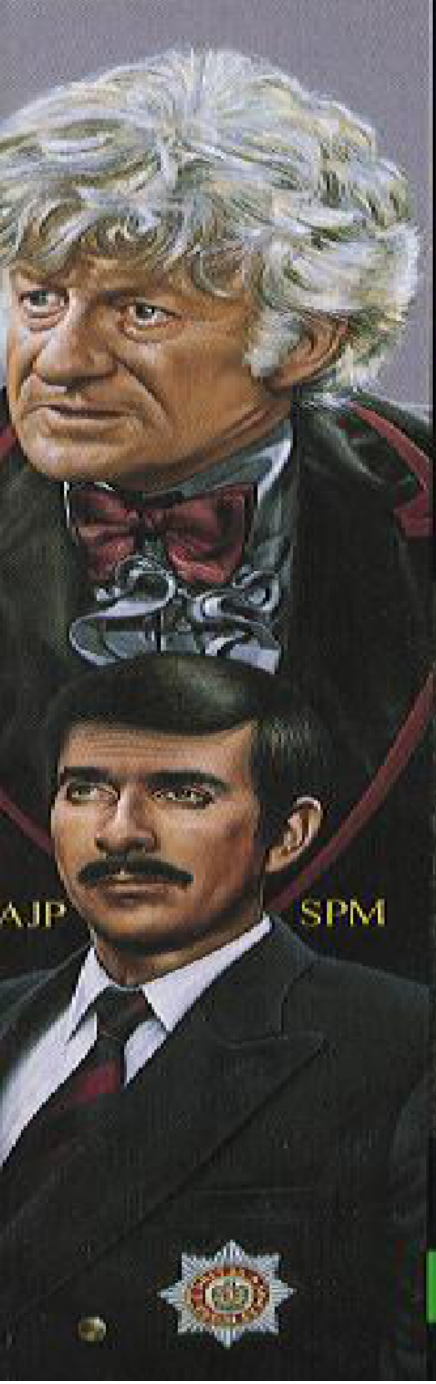
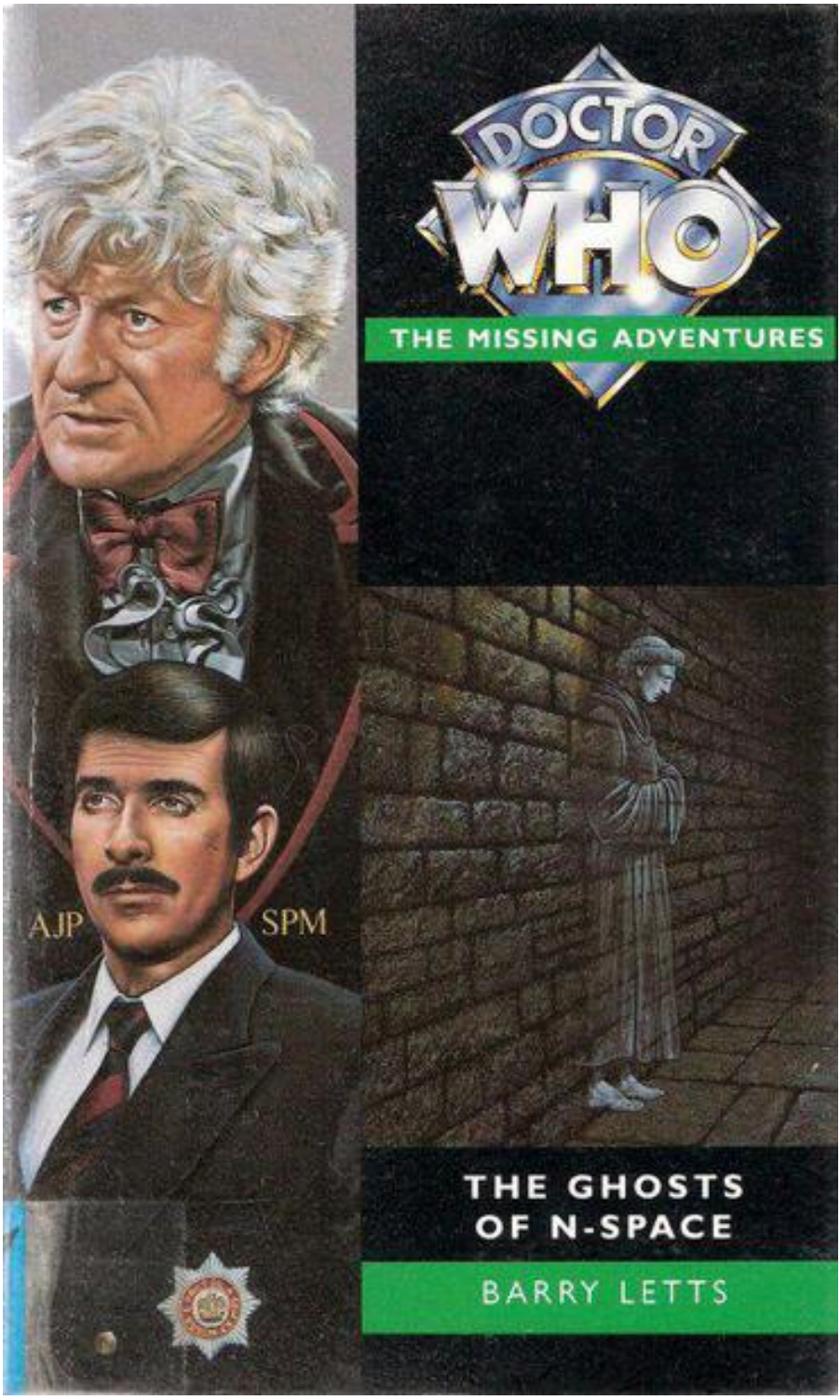


DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

THE GHOSTS OF N-SPACE

BARRY LETTS


DOCTOR
WHO
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THE GHOSTS
OF N-SPACE
BARRY LETTS

THE GHOSTS OF N-SPACE

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE THIRD DOCTOR, SARAH JANE SMITH AND BRIGADIER LETHBRIDGE-STEWART

'WHEN THE BARRIER GIVES WAY THIS PLANET WILL BE FLOODED BY ALL THE EVIL IN N-SPACE. AND, AT THE MOMENT, I HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO STOP IT.'

Sarah Jane Smith, on holiday with her chum Jeremy and a bad case of writer's block, is amazed to find the Brigadier in the same part of Italy. He is there to help a distant relative whose tiny island home has been threatened by American mobster Max Vilmio.

When the ghosts that haunt the island's crumbling castle are joined by less benign spectres, the Brigadier summons the Doctor – who discovers that the whole of mankind is threatened by the plans of the ruthless Vilmio and his mysterious, hooded henchman.

This adventure takes place between the television stories **DEATH TO THE DALEKS** and **THE MONSTER OF PELADON**. As a radio play, scripted by Barry Letts, it is being broadcast on BBC Radio 2 in 1995 with Jon Pertwee, Elisabeth Sladen and Nicholas Courtney resuming their television roles as the Doctor, Sarah Jane and the Brigadier.

BARRY LETTS has had a long association with **DOCTOR WHO**. He has written several scripts for television, a novelization of **THE DAEMONS**, as well as the recent radio play **THE PARADISE OF DEATH**. He was producer of the television series from 1970 to 1974.

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WHO
THE MISSING ADVENTURES

THE GHOSTS

OF N-SPACE

Barry Letts

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One

Don Fabrizzio had great hopes that it would not be necessary to kill Max Vilmio. But he was very angry with him.

There had been a long period of peace amongst the Mafia Families of

northern Sicily. The long drawn-out feuds of the fifties had been settled largely by respect for the supremacy of Don Fabrizzio (established with a ruthlessness unmatched by the toughest of his rivals). The areas of control and the parcelling out of the various enterprises were as he had decreed; and the result had been a time of amity – and prosperity for all concerned.

And then the upstart Vilmio had bought this island –

always understood to be within the Fabrizzio domain, although it was of little account in his extensive business empire – and used it as a base to make forays onto the mainland which were becoming more than could be tolerated.

From the moment he had arrived from the States, importing a small army of followers, it was clear that a 1

takeover was his ultimate aim. But now he had gone too far, running the Don's emissaries off the island as if they were the chicken-shit bully-boys of a Main Street Boss from the Mid-West.

His arrogance was beyond reason, thought the old man.

Although the purpose of this visit was quite clear, he had not even bothered to provide himself with bodyguards.

He gazed thoughtfully at the massive figure before him

– and at the man in the monk's habit standing discreetly in the background by the great open fireplace. Vilmio had addressed him as Nico. Not a priest, then. A lay brother, some hanger-on. Well, he needn't think having him present would save him if the decision had to be taken.

'You understand, my boy,' said the Don gently, 'that it is out of the love and respect I bear for your father, may his soul rest in peace, that I come to see you personally.'

The giant Max smiled a little too readily back at the old man. 'It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Isola di San Stefano Maggiore, Don Fabrizzio. All of you,' he added, giving a glance to the cold-faced aide carrying a document case who stood at the capo-mafioso's shoulder and to the two bodyguards behind.

He politely gestured to the nearest armchair with his stiff gloved hand. His whole right arm was artificial, so the Den's consigliere had

reported after the first abortive visit.

2

The result of a Mafia quarrel? Possibly. Yet Don Fabrizzio's enquiries had indicated that Vilmio had always held himself apart from the business of his adopted Family in New York.

'In order that there might be no possibility of misunderstanding,' the Don said, as he tried to settle his bones into the corners of the starkly fashionable chair, 'it seemed advisable for me to make quite sure that you realize the help that we can give you – not only in my little corner, or indeed in Sicily as a whole, but throughout Italy. Rome has been known to frown on enterprises such as yours. The more friends you have the better.'

The large face opposite was still smiling, although the eyes were hard. 'Enterprises such as mine? You seem very sure that you know what I'm going to do, Don Fabrizzio.'

The Don held up his hands in a placatory gesture. 'Business is business,' he said. 'I make no moral judgement.'

'In order that there might be no possibility of misunderstanding,' Vilmio said, 'what do you reckon I'm up to?'

Before Fabrizzio could answer, the door at the far end of the great drawing room opened and in came a bikinied figure, carrying a tray. 'Coffee!' she called; and the one word was of the purest Brooklyn, undefiled.

3

Max Vilmio looked up in irritation. 'Maggie!' he said.

'I told you we were not to be disturbed. Get lost.'

The blonde head shook at him reprovingly as she surveyed up the room. 'I know you Eyeties. Can't get going till you've had your fix!' She giggled. 'Hark at me! Still, I should know.'

She dumped the tray of little espresso cups onto the glass coffee table, so incongruous in the ancient palazzo with its velvet drapes and Moorish rugs.

'We're talking business here, babe,' said Vilmio.

‘You got it, Daddy-o. I’m gone already. See? Watch me go!’

So the four men watched her backside retreat to the door, where she turned to give them a wink and a farewell wiggle.

The coffee was ignored. The Don, no longer smiling, turned-to the thin man by his side. ‘Consigliere,’ he said.

‘Show Signor Vilmio the contract.’

Max glanced at the sheet of paper he was offered. He seemed unimpressed. ‘A lot about percentages, yeah. Not much detail of what I can expect in return.’

The consigliere spoke for the first time. ‘Protection,’ he said.

4

Max Vilmio burst out laughing. ‘I’m not some punk running a liquor store in the Bronx. Protection against your hoods? Come on!’

The old man shook his head. ‘We are suggesting nothing so crude, Signore. Your – your line of business is well established in these parts. You can expect jealousies to arise which might have unfortunate consequences. With our contacts we can –’

But he was interrupted. ‘My line of business? You’re guessing again, Don Fabrizzio.’

‘I think not.’

‘Well? What exactly am I up to? In a word.’

Fabrizzio looked at him with a slight frown. The man was not playing the game according to the rules. The Sicilian subtlety which ruled all such negotiations should forbid such plain speaking.

‘In a word?’ he said at last. ‘Whores.’

Elspeth looks in horror at the still smoking automatic in her hand and unwillingly lifts her eyes to the impossible sight of the old man’s body. How could such a thing have happened? And what is she going to do now?

The noise of the door heralds the arrival of the person she fears most in all the world, the erstwhile drug- smuggler from Valparaiso, Garcia O’Toole, who is in Scunthorpe 5

visiting his Irish aunt and happens to have heard the shot as he…

'Oh phooey,' said Sarah Jane Smith aloud. 'That's just plain silly.' Yet Garcia had got to turn up and catch Elspeth or she'd never get them in bed together.

Standing up, she clasped her fingers behind her back and stretched her arms to ease the stiffness in her shoulders.

The dapple of light on the wall, reflected from the ripples in the harbour, reminded her that she was supposed to be on holiday.

Abandoning Elspeth to her fate, she wandered over to the window and perched on the sill, closing her eyes to the glare of the Mediterranean sun, and leant back, revelling in the coolness of the spring breeze on her skin.

Perhaps the whole enterprise was a non-starter, she thought. It was all very well dudgeoning out of Clorinda's office like a mardy adolescent… Huh! Who'd want Clorinda for a mum? Bad enough having her for an editor.

Couldn't she see that the Dalek piece was the biggest scoop of all time, the soft cow? As if Sarah would make up a story as far out as that; as if she'd pretend she'd been to another planet and all; and invent a living city and mechanical snakes and stuff.

6

It wasn't as though it was the only time it had happened.

Every time she'd been with the Doctor in his TARDIS –

back into the past, chasing the Sontaran; the trip to Parakon with its giant bats and butcher toads; and now the Exxilon affair – she'd come back convinced she'd got the story of her life, only to have Clorinda spike it on the grounds of implausibility. And when even she had to admit the truth of the dinosaurs – they'd been all over London, for Pete's sake

– the Brig pulled rank as officer commanding the United Nations Intelligence Task Force in the UK, slapped a D-notice on the inside story and Sarah was scuppered again.

It was definitely last straw time; time to get out and make a fresh start. She didn't care if she never saw Clorinda again. Or the Doctor

and the Brigadier for that matter.

So when Jeremy, a colleague on the magazine, suggested that she come on a (purely platonic) holiday with him – a ticket was going begging, Jeremy's Mama (as he called her) having cried off when she realized the dates clashed with the local horse show – she jumped at the chance to get away from it all.

But maybe it was going a bit too far to turn her back on journalism so comprehensively. Writing a bestseller (cunningly contrived to appeal to the romantic *and* the thriller market, and at the same time show such quality that it would undoubtedly win the Booker as well as being 7

hailed by the critics as the novel of the century) was turning out to be a rather more sticky job than she'd expected. She hadn't even finished a rough storyline yet and they'd been in Sicily for over a week.

She opened her eyes and squinted at the lively scene below the hotel window, a kaleidoscope of colour (even though it was so early in the season) as the tourists paraded their holiday garb, or sat guzzling at the cheap and cheerful trattorias which lined the front. Across the harbour the little steamer which was the smallest of the boats which ran a ferry service to the islands to the north was puffing its way in, giving an occasional plaintive toot as it threaded its way through the sailing boats.

It certainly all looked considerably more attractive than the excessively flowered wallpaper behind her keyboard which had yielded such a small amount of inspiration all morning.

Go for a sail. That was the thing. Meet Jeremy for lunch as usual; a pizza, a glass of vino and then ho for the rolling main. Or whatever. Let Elspeth get on with it. She and Garcia deserved one another.

'But I don't like sailing!'

'How do you know if you've never tried? It's great. Just sit in the bottom of the boat and do as you're told.'

8

'Don't be so bossy! You're not my sister, you know.'

'Thank heavens for small mercies.'

‘Well, if I’m sick, you’ve only got yourself to blame.’

It was a perfect day for sailing; as calm as the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, with a brisk breeze from the west. Jeremy soon stopped grumbling. In fact, once they were well and truly under way and making for the middle of the harbour, he was sitting up, pink-cheeked and tousle-haired, with a grin on his face like a puppy’s on its first walk.

And as for Sarah…

Sarah was good at sailing, having undergone a period of intensive tuition (just after she left school) from a sub-lieutenant in the Royal Navy who’d called her ‘old thing’

and sworn undying love before thankfully disappearing Hong Kong-wards. Sarah, heart-whole and sun-tanned, had spent the rest of the summer in a dinghy and a glow of satisfaction.

Now, sensing the wind on her cheek, keeping an eye on the sail to note the slightest tremor, her body inches from the speeding water as she layout to windward, she could feel the boat, close-hauled on the port tack, pulling away under her hand like a racehorse at full gallop. A glimpse of Garcia’s moustachioed face flashed into her mind. Get lost, 9

she cried internally. What do I care how you get to Scunthorpe?

But her concentration had hiccupped. A gust of wind from an unlikely quarter swung the boat to starboard, revealing (what the sail had been hiding) that the little island ferry on its way out of harbour was bearing down on her menacingly and honking like a demented goose.

‘Look out!’ cried Jeremy, unhelpfully.

There was only one thing to do and Sarah instinctively did it. Continuing the swing to starboard, she scrambled back into the boat ready to wear round, sheeting in to prevent the boom whipping across when the wind caught the leech of the sail from astern. She glanced up at the bow of the ferry, only yards away. She should just about make it.

It was at that moment that she saw the Brigadier, leaning over the rail.

She didn’t collide with the steamer. But the shock was enough to

make her miss the moment of gybing. The boom was flung across with the full force of the wind, narrowly missing her head; the boat heeled to port, failed to recover, and Sarah and Jeremy were in the water.

The art of recovering from a capsize had been part of Sarah's sailing course, the lesson recurring perhaps more often than might have been expected, had it not included the 10

strict necessity for tutor and pupil to help each other to get dry.

Long before Sarah had sailed the boat back to the quayside, the afternoon sun had dried her and Jeremy even more thoroughly, but he showed no sign of appreciating that righting an upturned boat was all part of the fun. He seemed to have turned against the whole thing and grumpily refused to believe that she'd seen the Brig.

'Why on earth should he come here?'

'Why shouldn't he?'

'I bet it wasn't him. Was he wearing his uniform?'

'Well, no. He was wearing a blazer, I think.'

'There you are, then.'

'He wouldn't dress up in uniform if he was on holiday, you twit. It was a Briggish sort of blazer, anyway.'

But by the time they had returned the boat and were walking back to their posh hotel (thank you, Jeremy's Mama), she was becoming more and more convinced that she had made a mistake. She was off her chump. Working too hard. How could it be that he should turn up in exactly the same small Italian resort as Jeremy and her? It was about as likely as Garcia having an Auntie Nuala from Galway living just down the road from Elspeth; and that was enough to worry about without imaginary Brigs poking their officious noses in.

11

'A tourist centre, a leisure complex; an island – two islands – I am negotiating to buy San Stefano Minore as well. Two islands, two centres, catering between them for all the desires of every sort of holidaymaker. Strictly legitimate. If the hostesses are friendly and obliging, what business is it of mine? Or yours? Why should I need your help? Or…' he paused. His voice became hard. 'Or your

protection?'

Don Fabrizzio's voice was equally hard. 'A bordello, a whore-house, a leisure complex – what's it matter what you call it?' His voice softened, almost pleading with the American to see sense. 'You are a rich man already – a multi-millionaire if my information is correct. If you are wise, you will devote some of your profits to the cultivation of goodwill. You will not be the loser.'

Vilmio rose to his feet and spoke down to the little Don from his quite considerable height. The contempt in his voice was now overt. 'A multi-millionaire? You're wrong. I got to be a multi-billionaire over three years ago. Do you think I did it by giving away my profits? Or by letting myself be kicked around by some two-bit Godfather with cowshit between his toes?'

Don Fabrizzio sighed. He would have so much preferred the matter to be settled without violence.

12

He rose to his immaculately shod feet, knowing that the two men at the back of him would now be alerted for his signal.

'Very well,' he said. 'You have been offered the hand of friendship and you have chosen to spurn it. I am sad.

When I think of my friend, your father –'

'You are a sentimental old woman – just as he was. He wasn't my father, and you know it. I helped the guy with a business problem is all – and he welcomed me into the Family. It suited me to go along with his garbage for a while. And now he's feeding the worms.'

Don Fabrizzio looked into the sneering face. The world would be well rid of this *pezzo di merda*.

'Goodbye, Signore,' he said quietly.

Max Vilmio turned his massive back. But as the Don opened his mouth to give the word, the big man swung like an Olympic discus thrower, his metal arm flailing out and round full into the Don's face, crushing the front of his skull into a bloody pulp.

As he slumped to the floor, Max's other guests discovered that they suddenly had an excellent view down the barrels of a pair of semi-

automatic rifles. The luxurious velvet hangings were good for more than keeping out the draughts.

13

The monkish figure by the fireplace watched impassively. He had not moved or made a sound.

But what was that curious little noise, from the far end of the room? Why, it was a bubbling giggle of delight –

coming from the lusciously scarlet lips of a face topped with wayward blonde curls, peeping through the crack of the door.

14

Two

When Sarah restarted work the next day on the Greatest British Novel of the Twentieth Century, she still had no answer to the embarrassment of Garcia's opportune arrival at the scene of the shooting. So she decided to act on the principle that if she ignored it, it might go away. This proved an excellent strategy. Everything fell into place with surprising complaisance. By midday the end of the storyline was hull down on the horizon.

Just a few loose ends, thought Sarah. She could tie everything up as neatly as any gift-wrapped parcel and then go back to sort out Garcia and his too convenient relative.

But as she neared the end, she found herself slowing down. If it was all going to work, she had to decide who was the old man's real heir; and the only character she had left who fitted the bill was his gardener – and that was an even more unlikely coincidence than Garcia's fortuitous stroll down Scunthorpe High Street.

Very funny, mate, she said to her unconscious muse.

Laugh? She could have died laughing, if she hadn't been so near to tears.

Just wanting to walk away from the whole silly mess, she made an executive decision that it was lunchtime and set off towards pasta, vino and Jeremy.

15

There was no sun today. Matching the grumpiness of Sarah's mood, the lowering sky was set off by the rising wind. And that went with her general feeling of rattiness, didn't it? Maybe there was something in the good old pathetic fallacy, after all. Yeah, and that's what she was, too. Pathetic. Just because she'd written the odd magazine piece that was worth a nod, what made her think she could –

At which point she rounded the corner of the hotel, head down against the bluster of the incipient gale, and ran straight into Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart.

Afterwards, Sarah castigated herself for not greeting him with something a little more intelligent – or cool at least

– than 'Whoops!' Not that his own remark was very much more sophisticated. 'Miss Smith – ah – Sarah!' he said, as he released the arm he had grabbed to steady her.

'I thought it was you,' she said. 'Yesterday. On the boat.'

'Mm. It *is* Sarah, isn't it?'

The Brigadier peered uncertainly at her as though she had grown a ginger beard or something since they last met.

'Of course it is,' she said.

'Well, you never know, do you? You might be a…' His voice trailed away as he peered at her again, frowning.

'You're quite sure you're not a… but then you wouldn't know if you were, would you? Damn silly idea.'

He turned, shaking his head, and made his way past her.

Sarah watched him go. What on earth was the matter with the man?

Even the pleasure of the tacit 'told-you-so' to Jeremy (who still didn't believe her) was not enough to erase the Brigadier's extraordinary behaviour from her mind. It remained with her throughout a plate of penne amatriciana, so large she couldn't finish it, and a half litre of vino rosso which she irritably shared with her sceptical companion.

But then, as they were paying the bill, vindication: a cry from Jeremy, 'Hey, look! There he is!'

She swung round to see the man himself, carrying a suitcase now, boarding the ferry. He'd plainly spotted her; in fact, he caught her eye; and with a strange, almost shifty, expression on his face vanished below.

It was too much to bear. 'Come on!' she said and started across the cobbled hard towards the quayside with the protesting Jeremy scuttling after.

'But what are we doing here? We don't even know where we're going!' he said indignantly once they were safely on board the boat, having very nearly missed it.

'Call yourself a journalist,' she answered, as they made their way across the uneasy deck, which was already feeling the effects of the choppy water, even before they had reached the harbour entrance. 'You've got to have the nose 17

of a truffle pig if you're going to find stories that are worth anything. There's something strange going on, and I'm going to find out what.'

'A truffle pig?' said Jeremy. 'You're just nosy.'

'That's right,' she agreed cheerfully. 'Got anything better to do?' she added, grabbing hold of the rail as a particularly insistent lurch threatened to send her flying.

'Thinking of doing a spot of sunbathing, were you?'

Some two hours later, even Sarah could have thought of a host of better things to do. She'd quickly found the Brigadier, morosely sipping a large scotch in the shelter of the little bar, and managed to slip away again without his noticing her.

Rejoining her reluctant colleague, who was already starting to turn pale, she'd studied the map on the wall of the main saloon, trying to guess which of the islands the Brigadier might be making for. Lipari, the biggest, was the most likely, she decided.

Not a bit of it. Not Lipari; not Vulcano; not Salina; not Panaria; at none of the group of Aeolian islands was the Brig to be seen amongst the disembarking passengers. It became increasingly (and, as, the wind and the sea rose, increasingly uncomfortably) obvious that he was intending to stay on board until the ship reached its last ports of call –

the little islands of San Stefano Maggiore and San Stefano Minore away to the west. She pointed this out to the inert body lying on the bench seat opposite and was rewarded by a grunt; and, truth to tell, by the time they were bumpily coming alongside the jetty which formed the eastern boundary of the little harbour at Porto Minore, her enthusiasm for the expedition was hardly greater than his.

'Wakey, wakey,' she said. 'We're there.'

'Where?' a faint voice enquired.

'Wherever.' She surveyed the face attached to the voice (which was now a tasteful shade of eau-de-nil). 'You look ghastly,' she said in an objective way. 'Sort of dead-ish.'

'I wish I were,' came the nearly inaudible reply.

As Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart trudged heavily up the path through the orange trees whipping back and forth in the rising wind – it was so narrow and convoluted that it could hardly be accounted a road, even though it was the only way up the hill from the harbour – the plurality of worries which rumbled through his mind conflated into one overwhelming undefinable emotion: a sort of gloomy frustrated desperate rage.

Of course, he was thinking, Uncle Mario was clearly loopy when he first met him, when Granny MacDougal brought him to San Stefano on his first summer hols from 19

prep school – and Uncle was a middle-aged man then. But now! You only had to look at him, with his shock of spiky grey hair, hopping around like a cross between an aged Puck and an Italian Mr Punch – Pulcinello, they called him, didn't they?

But surely his sort of pottiness couldn't be hereditary, could it? But anyway, if it could, he was hardly in the direct line. Even if it were true that he was the old codger's only living relative… Good grief, as if he wanted to take on the responsibility of being Lord of the Manor – Barone, or whatever – of a tiny little island in the middle of nowhere!… even if it were true, it was a pretty tenuous connection. Not even a great uncle, really. His grandmother's second cousin – so what did that make him?

Third cousin three times removed or something ridiculous.

If it was in the blood, though…

On the other hand, some sorts of craziness were catching, weren't they? *Folie a deux*. That's what they called it.

And just when he was managing to persuade himself that he hadn't been seeing things, and that it was undoubtedly the right course to ring the Doctor at UNIT, he'd had that hallucination on the boat – the Smith girl –

and then again this morning… She'd seemed real enough.

But how could you tell? She'd hardly be carrying a banner –

20

or wearing a T-shirt – with 'Please note: I am not a figment of your imagination' written on it; and even if she had, what was the guarantee that that wouldn't have been a hallucination too?

The Brigadier gave up. He stopped for a breather and thankfully put down the ever heavier case. He'd never intended to stay at the castello. When his ninety-two-year-old relative had appealed to him for help, he'd decided that noblesse oblige was all very well – blood thicker than water and all that – but it would be safer to stay on the mainland and just pay a visit. He'd got his own life to live.

With a sigh, he picked up the case in his other hand and resumed his unhappy progress towards the castle which crowned the hill – or mountain as the locals called it –

which dominated the little island, falling away to the sea in an unscaleable cliff on the north side.

He had to stay as long as it was necessary. After all, he could hardly leave the old fellow to face the unspeakable Max Vilmio all by himself.

The Brigadier's pursuers had been quite glad of a chance to catch their breath themselves. He'd set a pretty steady pace, only stopping a couple of times, and their own progress had been complicated by the necessity for dodging behind every convenient outcrop or bush in case he turned round, though he never did; and now he disappeared 21

through the big Arabian Nights sort of archway that led through the perimeter wall of the castle on the southern corner.

Sarah nipped after him, stopping in the shelter of the gatehouse, staying close to the massive wooden gate that had clearly not been closed for an eon, and was just in time to see him vanish into the castle itself and close the heavy iron-bound door firmly behind him.

She moved into the big open courtyard – the bailey, they called it, didn't they? she thought, digging into her own remote past; though the castle didn't really match with what she'd been taught at primary school.

It was a bit of a mongrel, she decided. Its outer wall, which was in the form of a diamond, with a defensive tower on each of the east and west points, was definitely of Arab construction. It had different out-buildings all around, though quite a few were derelict. The stables, for example, clearly hadn't had any occupants for years.

But the main building, which rose enormous and menacing into the stormy sky ahead of her, was plainly a Norman keep – even though larger windows had been installed to turn it into a house rather than a fortress, and a Renaissance campanile (or maybe clock tower) was sticking up incongruously from its rear.

What was the Brigadier doing in a place like this?

22

'So what do we do now?'

Sarah didn't answer. It was a rhetorical question, designed to needle her, on a par with all the other whispered grumbles she'd been forced to listen to all the way up the steep pathway. In any case, she didn't know the answer.

She was beginning to feel rather foolish. After all, what business had she to pry into the Brig's private life?

Jeremy was no longer bothering to whisper. Apart from anything else, the wind was rapidly turning into a full gale.

'I'm hungry and I'm cold – and if you ask me –' he started to say in a petulant voice.

'Okay, okay. You win! We'll go back. Honestly, it's like taking a three-year-old out for a walk. We'll catch the next boat. Right?'

This was easy to say, but when they had struggled through the

buffeting wind back down to the village, the bleak information on the wall near the jetty was that the little ship visited only twice a day; and it was clear that none of the big tourist boats bothered to come out to the islands of San Stefano. They were stuck until the next morning.

'Never mind,' said Sarah, brightly, perforce continuing her Nanny role, 'we've got money, so it's only a matter of finding somewhere to have some food and a place to kip down for the night. It's an adventure, isn't it?'

23

But Jeremy refused to be jollied along. 'Where would you suggest?' he said bitterly, peering through the gathering twilight at the firmly closed trattoria, with its ice-cream parlour, and the blank faces of the shuttered houses. There was not a person in sight and the only light was a single bare bulb by the harbour steps.

It soon became clear that the Italian tradition of hospitality to the stranger was in abeyance on San Stefano Minore. Hearty knocks on several doors produced no result other than the lonely cry of a scared child and a menacing shout of ' *Se ne vada!* '

By the time they had retraced their steps to the castello and crossed the broken stones (with grass growing through the cracks) of the bleak emptiness between the gate tower and the heavy front door of the keep – what else could they do? She'd just have to face the Brigadier and apologize –

Sarah wasn't sure whether the tears in her eyes were really the effect of the harsh wind. Darkness had descended as suddenly, it seemed, as nightfall in Africa the time she'd travelled from the Caribbean to the old Slave Coast on the Voodoo Witch-Doctor story which got her the job on *Metropolitan*.

As she yanked the bell – an old-fashioned pull-it-and-hope job – she could see Jeremy's face in the moonlight, wide-eyed and wan. She should never have brought him.

24

He'd probably catch pneumonia and die or something, and then she'd have to organize flying his coffin home and all; and what would she tell his Mama?

She pulled the bell again. There was no reply. She couldn't even hear

the jingle-jangle of the bell inside. There was no sound at all, bar the distant howling of a village dog, and the soughing of the wind in the trees. But then…

'What was that?' said Jeremy, his head jerking round in fright.

A cry of alarm; a shriek of fear; a voice calling a name in a frenzy of desperation.

'It came from round there,' said Sarah, and set off towards the left side of the keep.

'Come back!' cried Jeremy as she disappeared.

There was nobody in sight round the corner. But the moonlight was bright enough for her to make out what seemed to be a garden wall behind the house. Where it joined on to the back wall of the perimeter, the whole thing seemed to have collapsed. It was from down there that the voice seemed to be coming.

She could still hear it as she arrived at the ruined bit: a keening hopeless wail. She clambered precariously up the heap of stones. 'Hang on, I'm coming!' she cried.

Her foot turned on a loose stone and she fell, rolling down the decline to her left, where the ground fell away in a five-hundred-foot drop to the sea.

Pulling herself back from the abyss, she lay clutching at the stones in a spasm of terror. But the voice came yet again, crying the name in a crescendo of despair.

Forcing herself to move, she pulled herself to the very top – in time to catch a glimpse of a figure, a girl in a white frock, plunging over the cliff to a certain death.

Scrambling down the stones, careless of painful scuffs and certain bruises, Sarah made her way to the edge.

Clinging frantically to the coarse grass to save herself from the tearing wind, she tried to look down. The moonlight showed her the sheer rock-face and the cruel breakers smashing themselves against the massive stones which had fallen from the broken wall. But there was no sign of the white dress.

Through the howl of the gale, she became aware of another sound, an inhuman cry, a high-pitched snarl. Still hanging on for her very life, she managed to turn her head enough to see the cause: crouching on the stones behind her, a glowing creature half ape, half carrion bird, reaching out with impossibly extended scaly arms to seize her in its vulture claws.

26

Three

Much to the. Brigadier's surprise, the arrival of the TARDIS

did not seem to upset Uncle Mario at all. But then, to one who took for granted the comings and goings of the assorted phantoms he'd described, one more dramatic materialization was probably neither here nor there.

Mario had erupted into the Brigadier's bedroom as he was grimly unpacking his suitcase, wondering how long he would have to extend his unpaid leave from UNIT. Family responsibilities were all very well, but if the old man should die – correction! *When* the old man died he would be the new Barone, with all that entailed. Yes, 'but what did it entail? He could hardly flog the island and leave the islanders to the tender mercies of a thug like Vilmio.

In any case, he quite liked the old beggar, even allowing for a lingering resentment dating back more than three decades. When little Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart had visited all those years ago, he'd insisted on taking with him a pile of his favourite books (as well as, secretly, his Teddy; as a prep-school boy, he was supposed to have put away such childish things). But the books were left behind and, in spite of numerous requests, never returned.

'Aha!'

27

He hardly reacted. In the short time he'd known Mario he'd grown accustomed to his abrupt manner of appearing and disappearing.

'Glad you come back, boy. I was half afraid that… But no, blood is blood. You true Italiano, through and through!'

'Uncle Mario,' said the Brigadier wearily, 'Granny MacDougal was only half Italian, so that makes me one-eighth Italian and seven-

eighths Scots.'

'Never mind,' replied Mario. 'You learn to speak proper the Italiano and nobody guess.'

'And I'm supposed to be over the moon about that?'

'Over the moon? Like the cat on the fiddle?'

'It's just an expression. An idiom. Used mainly by footballers,' said the Brigadier drily, putting his underpants neatly into a drawer.

The old man clapped his hands in delight. 'Ha! Over the moon! Better to kick ball over the moon than up the spout, eh? I learn to speak like real Scottishman before you say Jack Homer!'

It had quickly become clear where he had learnt most of his English. The Brigadier had already reluctantly decided to abandon his claim on the missing books.

Mario turned to go as unceremoniously as he'd arrived.

'Uncle!' said the Brigadier calling him back. 'I rang my scientific adviser. He's agreed to come out to look into these 28

– ah – ghosts of yours. It was a pretty bad line, but he said he'd come at once, so he'll probably catch the morning flight to Palermo and –'

The bony hands were flapping at him urgently. 'Si, si, si! I must screw my head on more tighter. Yes. I forget. He is here, your Doctor in a blue box. I tell him you acoming, yes?'

With a little agitated skip, he was gone.

'So I thought I'd better give you a shout. Just on the off chance that I wasn't going round the bend, you know.' The Brigadier gave a little laugh to indicate that this was a joke, knowing that he had no chance at all of fooling his friend.

They were having a pre-dinner drink in the great hall on the first floor of the castello. A dusty, untidily informal museum of a place, with bits and pieces from every period lying about, some probably priceless (as, for instance, an ornate golden cup, standing by the telephone, full of broken pencils, which was decorated with bas-reliefs depicting the amorous adventures of Zeus), others pure junk.

A gallery above the door, reached by a steep flight of stairs in the

comer, was dominated by a large painting depicting the death of Caesar. The noble tragedy of the scene was somewhat offset, however, by the fact that the 29

picture was hanging at a drunken angle some forty-five degrees from the horizontal.

A large eighteenth-century dining table took up a certain amount of the hall; and the area around the grand old fireplace had been turned in effect into a cosy sitting room.

It was somehow comforting, thought the Brigadier, to see the white-haired elegant figure of the Doctor in his elaborately frilled shirt and his velvet jacket standing with his back to the blazing log fire warming the seat of his trousers.

'My dear Lethbridge-Stewart,' he answered, 'to call me in was probably the most rational thing you've ever done.

From what you tell me, there is something extremely disturbing going on here.'

He turned to Mario, who was standing with his head on one side like a curious parrot, inspecting the TARDIS, which was parked neatly but incongruously in the comer.

'Signore – I beg your pardon, Barone –'

'No, no. Is not real, this Barone. Only label, like on empty jamjar,' he answered, coming to the fire and settling into his big old wing chair, wriggling into the cushions like a dog settling into its basket. 'I am Mario Verconti, plain.

Plain as nose on face. I am called Barone because I am Esquire. Esquire, is right? I own the Isola di San Stefano 30

Minore, like my father and his fathers before him from the beginning.'

'And you told the Brigadier, Signore, that you and your forebears have always known the castello to be haunted?'

'Of course. The lady in white dress, I see her often when I was bambino. But not the little diaboli, the fiends from the pit. They come only now, more and more, the rascals.'

'And you say you've seen them too, Brigadier?'

The Brigadier shifted uneasily. This was the question, wasn't it? Had he seen them?

'I don't believe in ghosts,' he said, 'and yet, well, I certainly have caught a glimpse of one. At least, I think I have.' A glimpse! He felt again the full horror of the sight of the – the thing; the slimy tentacles, the blood-red eyes, the razor teeth. He shuddered.

'Has anybody else witnessed these phenomena?'

'Eh?' said Mario.

'The ghosts, the apparitions. Have they been seen by anybody but you and the Brigadier?'

'Oh, sure. Our servants, they run away like cowardy custard creams, back to village. Only Umberto to cook, to clean all castello, poor old thing.'

A bit rich, thought the Brigadier, considering the butler could give Mario a dozen years or more.

31

'Aha!' The old man leapt from his chair like a startled jack-in-the-box, tottering a little as he landed.

What now?

'You hear?'

The Doctor seemed to have heard something too. But the Brigadier was only aware of the wind whistling through the cracks in the ill-fitting windows. 'What is it?' he said a little testily.'

'Sssh!' The Doctor held up a warning hand. 'There it is again.'

This time he heard it. A scream? A shout? A voice certainly.

'Come quick! You see her, the lady in white.'

Out of the hall at a fast clip, down a long dark corridor, round a corner into a vaulted lobby with six exits; back down another passageway, round another corner and another, and still another, through a creaking little door which yet was some four or five inches thick, and out into the night. The Brigadier finally lost the fight to keep his breath as the three of them found themselves in a colonnaded

courtyard, thrusting against the aggressive squalls sweeping in through the gap where the wall had collapsed into the sea.

32

Mario, seemingly the least affected, turned dramatically, indicating with an almost operatic sweep of his arm that they had reached their goal.

But there was no phantasm of the night to be seen. A voice could be heard, certainly, but it was the voice of – yes, there was no question – the voice of young Jeremy of all people, as he slithered and tumbled down the heap of stones to the left, desperately trying to reach…

The Doctor saw her at the same moment: lying on the sloping edge where the grass gave way to blackness, the body of Sarah Jane Smith, limp and defenceless. Her short hair was whipping about her face and her denim shirt slapping and flapping on her body as it struggled to get free; surely the next gust would have her over.

'Jeremy! Keep back!' cried the Doctor, running across the courtyard.

. Throwing himself full length onto the slippery grass, he inched himself forward, with the Brigadier hanging onto his ankles as he reached out to the unconscious Sarah and seized her by the arms.

With infinite care, the Doctor drew her back from the edge, his firm grasp cheating the greedy wind of its prey, until it was safe to stand and carry her into the comparative shelter of the courtyard.

33

'Well, I don't know why you didn't waste the lot of them,' said Maggie, squinting into the dressing-table mirror as she repaired a ravaged set of eyelashes. She could see Max stretched out behind her, eyeing her naked back. 'The great bum,' she thought with a sort of contemptuous admiration and leaned forward for her lipstick to give him a better view.

'You want I should send his Family a telegram? They'll have got the message quicker this way.'

'Message? You didn't give that consigliere guy any message to take back.'

Max smiled unpleasantly. 'I didn't?'

‘What was it then?’

‘Unconditional surrender, that’s what. Like Ike and the Krauts. I’ve got more important things to do than play footsy with a bunch of peasants.

‘And that’s for sure,’ he added, almost to himself.

Maggie frowned. His face had taken on the hardness she had grown to fear, an evil determination chilling to see.

When he was like this, nobody was safe.

‘Ike? Ike who?’ she said. ‘Ike from the deli?’

It worked. His face resumed its normal sneer. ‘Yeah, Ike from the deli. Face it, honey, you’re just an ignorant broad from Brooklyn.’

‘Sure,’ she said, in relief. She sucked a smear of lipstick from a front tooth. ‘Great tits, though.’

It was only a long time later, when Sarah was safely tucked up in an enormous bed, watching the homely firelight flickering on the high ceiling, that she came to the conclusion that to come out of a faint saying ‘Where am I?’

was probably the oldest cliché in the book.

‘But I never faint. I’ve never passed out in my life,’

she’d said, feebly indignant, to the three anxious faces peering down at her as she struggled out of the mists; and it was then that all such thoughts were swept from her mind by the abrupt remembrance of the reason for her so recently acquired weakness; and she had started shaking anew and allowed the Brigadier to carry her to the warmth of the great hall – for assuredly her legs would not have carried her there.

‘What was it? The thingy in the archway?’

Jeremy, who had been shaking almost as hard as Sarah, had only been allowed to talk about what had happened once Sarah was comfortably ensconced in the big chair opposite Mario’s (in which the nonagenarian was napping, as if he’d seen it all before), clutching a mug of hot sugared milk with a slug of grappa in it which Umberto

had brought.

35

‘I mean, it wasn’t a real monster, like the ones on Parakon. It just sort of melted away.’

‘It was real enough, Jeremy,’ said the Doctor. ‘The fact that it vanished before it could do Sarah any harm only means that there isn’t enough power coming through yet.

And that means that I may still be in time.’

‘In time for what?’ said the Brigadier. ‘What exactly is going on, for Pete’s sake?’

‘On the other hand,’ continued the Doctor to Jeremy, quite ignoring the irritated Brigadier, ‘in a sense it’s no more real than an image in a dream. But then that applies to all of us, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Er, yes. I mean, no. That is, to be honest, I –’

‘Well, it certainly doesn’t apply to me,’ said the Brigadier, ‘and frankly I can’t see that it applies to any of us.

Sarah took a sip of her milk. It was no good feeling cross with the Doctor when he talked in that elliptical fashion. It was just the way he was. No doubt he would tell them what he meant in his own good time.

‘And yet you were quite prepared to believe that Miss Smith was a product of your own over-heated brain, when you met her this morning.’

‘Yes, well…’ said the Brigadier, his voice trailing away. Sarah could have sworn that he blushed. ‘You must 36

admit,’ he went on, ‘that it is the most impossible coincidence that we should have bumped into each other.’

‘Impossible? Evidently not, since it happened. In any case, you’re leaving out the likelihood of its being a simple case of synchronicity.’

Here we go again, thought Sarah.

‘Synchronicity?’ said the Brigadier.

‘The principle that a coincidence may happen without any causal link, and yet still be of significance. Whole systems of philosophy have been based on it. The *I Ching*, for example, as the chap who coined the word pointed out when we were discussing the question a few years ago.

Clever fellow, Carl.’

‘You mean, we were destined to meet?’

‘Fatalism might be considered a cruder version of a similar viewpoint, certainly.’

Sarah felt her eyelids drooping. She carefully placed the nearly empty mug on the little table by her elbow and tried to concentrate on the grown-ups’ words. The grown-ups?

She grinned at herself and listened.

‘I’ll be in a better position to explain when I’ve carried out a few investigations,’ the Doctor was saying. ‘Certainly I have a hypothesis, but to speculate without facts is a waste of valuable time, unless you have no other option.’

37

His voice had the hollow sound of her parents’ voices that she remembered from her childhood – in the car –

waking up late in the night on their way to the caravan they used to hire on the Gower coast; and she remembered the time they’d arrived just before the mother and father of all thunderstorms – standing on the clifftop watching the network of lightning over the sea; and she felt again her Dad’s hand resting comfortably on her shoulder as they marvelled at the delicate tracery of the flashes. She put up her hand to touch the warm dry skin she knew so well – and felt a scaly sliminess that brought a scream to her throat which couldn’t escape; and as the claws dug deep into her flesh, her muscles convulsed into a spasm of terror; and she woke up.

Four pairs of eyes were turned on her. She must have cried out. ‘I’m – I’m sorry,’ she managed to gasp. She started to shake again.

Maggie was only pretending to be asleep, as she often did. But even so she didn’t hear Nico come into the room.

‘Well?’ she heard Max ask.

‘You were right,’ the thin sad voice replied. ‘The top men of the four Families.’

‘How many?’

‘Nineteen.’

38

‘All in the same building?’

‘In the same room.’

‘And?’

‘War.’

She heard Max heave himself out of bed.

‘Great,’ he said. ‘Then you know what to do.’

There was quite a long pause before Nico answered.

‘Please, Signore,’ he said, ‘don’t ask me. I beg you.’

Maggie peeped at the tortured face from beneath her eyelids. Max was enjoying himself.

‘Poor Nico,’ he said. ‘How you do suffer. But then, if you don’t fry them…’

Fry them? Maggie’s eyes nearly popped wide open.

Was Max asking him to torch the nineteen top men from the local Mafia?

Max went on, ‘It’s like – damned if you do and damned if you don’t, isn’t it?’ Nico winced at the repetition of the word.

‘You refuse my command?’

Nico shuddered. ‘No, master, no! But if you want –’

‘What I want is rid of the lot of them. I want the stink of their burning flesh to be history. Got it?’

So it was true. Maggie hugged herself as a delicious tremor ran through her body. Even if she hated his guts sometimes, Max Vilmio was a real man!

39

He turned to climb back into bed and Maggie closed her eyes tight again; and this was why, when she eagerly opened them a moment later at a demanding caress from the object of her approbation, she was too late to see that Nico (his face a mask of anguish) had set off on his murderous errand by floating through the wall.

40

Four

The clock in the tower struck seven, Sarah's usual getting up time if she was going for a run on Hampstead Heath (which was its old self again now they'd pulled down Space World); or one hour before her getting up time if she wasn't, but was on an efficiency jag; or two hours before her time if she'd gone to bed late or didn't give a damn for any reason.

She opened her eyes, wide awake in an instant, to find a world washed clean; all things made new just for Sarah Jane Smith.

Looking out of the window to savour the sun and the sea and the Sicilian sky she found that she was at the back of the house, overlooking the cloistered courtyard of the night before. Like the part of the house her room was in, it looked as if it had been added at the back of the keep at about the same time as the clock tower.

Together with the walled garden next to it, which must have been beautiful before it was allowed to fall into such a neglected state, it would have made a private sanctuary for the family, away from the public bustle of the bailey yard.

A bit of exploration produced an adequate bathroom, although the hot water was a bit brown; and presently, 41

refreshed in mind and body alike, she set off in search of breakfast.

Nosy, that's what Jeremy called her. Spot on, me old mate, she thought as she seized the opportunity to do a bit of a recce.

The passages were so wide they were more, like galleries; and indeed,

the walls were lined with paintings dating from the early Renaissance up to the beginning of the twentieth century, both religious subjects and portraits. One of these, a severe matron in a crinoline with hair parted in the middle and sporting utterly inappropriate ringlets, Widow Twankey style, was nothing but the Brigadier in drag. For the rest of her tour, it kept coming back into her mind, and she'd explode into another fit of giggles.

After she'd summoned up the courage to peep in a room with the door ajar and found it quite empty, she felt a bit bolder and soon established that most of the place was unused. Quite a lot of the rooms were as empty as the first she'd looked into; others were furnished but hiding themselves under modest dust sheets; others were store rooms of one sort or another.

She came to with a start as she passed an archway leading to a spiral staircase. The booming of the clock, striking eight, told her that she was at the bottom of the 42

clock tower; and reminded her of her state of imminent starvation.

Unfortunately, once she got into the castle proper, the Norman bit, the long stone corridors all seemed the same, and it was only after nearly half an hour of wandering that the smell of fresh coffee led her to her goal.

'Buon giorno, signorina,' said Umberto with a smile, turning from his big stove.

'Hi there,' said Jeremy, with his mouth full.

Things were very pleasantly back to normal. Surely last night must have been nothing but a ghastly dream?

'If I am right, Lethbridge-Stewart,' said the Doctor, pausing in the doorway of the TARDIS, 'the people of this planet face one of the greatest dangers they have ever encountered.' He disappeared inside.

The Brigadier sighed. The Doctor seemed to say something of the sort every time they worked together; and infuriatingly he always seemed to be proved right. But how pleasant it would be occasionally to be involved in a more parochial type of problem, a 'little local difficulty'.

'What is it this time, Doctor? The end of the world? The destruction of the planet? Or is it merely another takeover by an evil race from the other side of the galaxy?'

The Doctor appeared again, carrying a small box shaped like an old-fashioned sea-chest. He dumped it on the large dining table and started rummaging inside.

'If you had the slightest inkling…' he started to say, and interrupted himself with an exasperated noise, halfway between a 'tut' and a 'pshaw'.

'Why is it things never stay where they are put?' he said. 'I know full well that I put my ion-focusing coil back in its place after Bertie Wells borrowed it for his invisibility experiment – ah! Here it is! What did I tell you?' He gave the Brigadier a disapproving look, at which the recipient felt obscurely guilty, as though it was ultimately his fault that the coil had been mislaid.

'Of course, young Bertie got it quite wrong in that little tale of his,' he went on, as he started to fit the small coil into the apparatus he was assembling. 'An invisible man such as he describes would be stone blind. The light would pass straight through him. With no lens to focus the light rays, and no retina for them to fall on, how could he see? All the invisible creatures I have ever met have relied for sight on parallel sensing of the trace that photons leave in N-Space.'

He looked up and evidently caught the blank look of incomprehension on his listener's face.

'In your terms, Lethbridge-Stewart, a variety of clairvoyance.' He returned to the intricate adjustment of the 44

complex insides of the piece of electronic equipment he was putting together.

Another voice spoke. 'What's N-Space, Doctor?'

The Brigadier looked round. Of course, Miss Smith –

and the boy. 'Good morning, my dear,' he said. 'How are you feeling now?'

'A lot better for a good night's sleep,' she answered. 'I was just about bombed out of my skull, what with all that brandy and the pill the Doctor gave me. And Signor Callanti has been so kind. We've had a super breakfast in that enormous kitchen of his – sort of olive bread, and salami and stuff.'

‘Never seems to have heard of marmalade, though,’ put in Jeremy. ‘Breakfast isn’t breakfast without marmalade.’

‘You have a point,” said the Brigadier. ‘But it’s got to be the right sort of marmalade. The bitter sort.’

The Doctor looked up. ‘Mm. Thick and dark,’ he said.

‘With chunks,’ agreed Sarah.

‘I prefer the jelly stuff myself,’ said Jeremy.

There was a moment of reverential silence as they all remembered past joys.

The Doctor picked up his construction from the table.

‘Come along then,’ he said, severely. ‘No time for chit-chat.’ He started for the door.

‘Where are we going?’ asked Sarah, as they hurried after him.

‘To have a peep into N-Space,’ said the Doctor.

When the Doctor said that she might have a glimpse of the creature which had so frightened her the night before, Sarah almost turned on her heel. But when he started to talk about N-Space again, as he led the way through the maze of corridors which led to the rear courtyard, somehow it made it all seem scientific and ordinary.

Apparently every world has a counterpart, intimately connected to it (as close as a pair of clasped hands, the Doctor said). In the normal course of events, it’s impossible to go there, or even to communicate with it, because it’s –

‘– it’s in the fourth dimension!’ said Jeremy brightly.

‘Young man,’ said the Doctor, ‘a lot of nonsense is talked by a lot of people about the fourth dimension – and the fifth and the sixth and the rest, for that matter.’

‘Where is it, then?’ said the Brigadier.

‘Nowhere. Literally. It’s a question you can’t ask.

There's no 'where' for it to be. You see, N-Space isn't in this Space–Time Continuum at all. That's how it gets its name. It's short for Null-Space.'

46

As the Doctor was speaking he was striding through the long, dimly lit stone passageways, never hesitating when offered a choice of several different directions.

'As I was about to say…' he went on, and gave Jeremy what Sarah's Dad used to call a Bite-Your-Tongue-Off-First look.

'Sorry,' murmured Jeremy and clamped his lips tight.

'As I was about to say, it's impossible to go to N-Space in the normal course of events or even to communicate with it because of the discontinuity you might expect between the two worlds, which forms a very effective barrier. It can normally only be crossed by the dying.'

'And ghosts?' said the Brigadier.

'I'll come to that,' said the Doctor. 'You see, every sentient being on Earth has an equivalent N-Body, co-terminous with the ordinary body.'

'Whatter-howmuch?' muttered Jeremy.

The Doctor, ignoring him, took the middle way of three possible routes, and continued, 'When somebody dies, the N-Body goes into N-Space. It often seems like a tunnel of darkness leading to a blissful light –'

'Oh! I've read about that,' said Sarah. 'People who've died on the operating table – and then brought back to life –

and they say all their dead family are there to welcome them, or angels or whatever and –'

47

'Where exactly are we going, Doctor?' said the Brigadier.

'To the cliff-top where we found Sarah, of course,' said the Doctor, coming to a standstill.

'Well, I think we're lost. This is the third time we've been down this

corridor.'

'Nonsense!' said the Doctor, taking a number of sharp incisive bearings with his penetrating eyes. 'How could you possibly tell? They all look exactly the same.'

'Precisely,' said the Brigadier.

With a glare, the Doctor started off again, but Sarah noticed that, although he didn't stop talking, he seemed to take rather longer to decide the way.

'The trouble is,' he continued, 'with some people the mind is so attached to the things of Earth that they either can't give them up, or refuse to. Often they can't even take it in that their earthly life is over. So instead of just passing through, they get stuck in N-Space. Some of them even try to get back through the barrier; and if they can find the smallest flaw, they'll come back and try to relive their final moments and make them come right.'

'Ghosts!' breathed Sarah.

'Ghosts,' said the Doctor, coming to a stop in the middle of one of the little vaulted chambers which had regularly punctuated their perambulations.

'Has anybody any suggestions as to the right way to go?' he said. 'Thanks to your strictures, Lethbridge-Stewart, I've become so disorientated that you seem to have got us comprehensively lost!'

It was finally due to Jeremy that they were able to find the way. Not that he had any better idea of where they were than anyone else; in fact, Sarah thought, it was only because he was Tail-Arse-Charlie – which, according to her sometime naval companion, was always the nickname of the last ship in line.

Mter wandering for a number of grimly silent minutes, they quite clearly found themselves re-entering the same little lobby. As they came to a standstill, Jeremy stopped dead, held up a hand and whispered, 'Listen!'

'What is it?' the Brigadier hissed.

'Ssh! Listen!'

They listened.

‘There’s somebody following us,’ said Jeremy, looking back.

With a gesture, the Doctor indicated that they should all take cover. As Sarah slipped into the mouth of a neighbouring corridor, she heard the footsteps for herself, starting, stopping, now fast, now slow, as of one who wanted to keep up, but didn’t want to be seen.

49

Since they had all taken up positions which hid them from the archway through which they had just arrived, nobody could watch the approach of the person – or thing, thought Sarah with a shudder. The sound of its feet slowed almost to a complete stop before a rush and a scurry brought Sarah’s hand to her mouth ready to stifle an involuntary scream and –

‘Aha!’

The spiky-haired little figure whirled round to face them. ‘You play hide and go squeak? I win you! I claim my forty fit!’ said Uncle Mario.

‘What is that thing?’ said the Brigadier.

Mario – gleeful to join in what he obviously considered an eccentric English game – had soon escorted them to the rear courtyard and out onto the clifftop by the ruined wall, where they stood like assorted lemons while the Doctor adjusted the controls on the top of the gadget in his hand.

Although there was still a pretty strong wind, there was no danger now of being blown over the edge. What with the brilliant blue sky, the springy grass sprinkled with tiny yellow flowers and the far bleating of a goat calling for its kid, Sarah could hardly believe she was standing so near the place of last night’s horror.

50

‘What a one you are for names, Lethbridge-Stewart,’

the Doctor answered. ‘I’ve been too busy building it to hold a christening. I cobbled it up from spare parts for the TARDIS’s navigation circuits. I suppose, if you insist, I could call it a Multi-Vectored Null-Dimensional Temporal and Spatial Psycho-Probe. But I’d much rather not. There we are. That should do it.’

He turned to the little group behind him. ‘Now please understand,’ he said, ‘that anything you see is nothing more than a…’ His voice faded to a puzzled silence.

He began again. ‘Boy,’ he said. ‘Jeremy. What do they call it when they show you a winning goal a couple of times over on the – er – the goggle-box?’

Sarah almost giggled at his pleasure in finding what he obviously thought was a word from the vernacular of the younger generation. ‘An action replay,’ she said.

‘I say!’ said Jeremy. ‘That’s not fair! I was just about to say that. I can’t help it if I had to think a bit. After all, I’m a rugger man myself; though I must admit I didn’t even get into the house second fifteen, thanks to Banks minor and his –’

‘Jeremy, be quiet,’ said the Brigadier.

‘Jolly unfair,’ he muttered and subsided into a sulky silence.

51

‘An action replay. That’s right. Bear that in mind. It’s not happening now. If you see a figure, it’s not even a ghost.

It’s just an image; a meta-spectre. A memory of a memory.’

Saying this, the Doctor raised the probe and pointed it at the crumbling pile of stones on the edge of the cliff: He pulled a sort of trigger. The machine started to hum.

At first, nothing else happened. The hum grew louder –

and louder – and Sarah was afraid that this was going to be one of those occasions when the Doctor’s efforts literally blew up in his hands.

But then she noticed that one of the stones in the ruined wall was starting to glow with a strange pearly light, which spread in a zigzag path across the heap, which it enveloped in a flickering aura; and then – oh, then she appeared, the girl in the white dress, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of despair and mouthing an unheard cry. Unsure and unsteady to the eye, like an image glimpsed through the swirling wreaths of a sea-mist, the slight figure ran towards the edge of the cliff and briefly stood, her arms outstretched to the heavens as if

appealing for an impossible succour.

Sarah felt again the rush of pity which had filled her heart the night before and she started forward, only to be held back by the firm hand of the Brigadier on her arm.

52

There was nothing she could do; nothing but stand and helplessly watch as the girl deliberately stepped forward and pitched headlong over the cliff.

But then, as Sarah openly wiped away the tear which had fallen onto her cheek, her attention was caught by a startled exclamation from Jeremy. She looked back at the ruined wall.

The shimmering light had extended itself in a series of crazed patterns like frozen lightning; and scattered nearby, spider-legged centres of cold fire were growing like shoots from a self-sown plant; and through the new-born light were appearing glimmerings of phantasms far more fearful than the unhappy wraith they had been watching.

Sarah saw again a flash of the chimera of her living nightmare. She saw glimpses of creatures even more horrific: inside out creatures gnawing at their own entrails; gaping heads, all mouth and fangs, with a maw large enough to swallow a full-grown pig – or a human; monstrous jellyfish with a hundred human eyes, staring, staring, staring; and more; and more; a menagerie of evil.

'I think we've seen enough,' came the Doctor's quiet voice. As he switched off his device, the creatures vanished.

The light faded and all was quiet. Quiet? thought Sarah. The lack of sound from the Doctor's induced images was somehow even more scary than a cacophony of squeals 53

would have been. The noise was in her mind, in her head; and she felt herself shaking it gently, as if to clear it of the detritus left by the sights she had seen.

'Well?' said the Brigadier.

'Not at all well,' replied the Doctor. 'It's as I feared. At some time in the past a massive psycho-physical shock has ruptured the barrier at this point and weakened it drastically

– possibly irreparably.'

'Irreparably? You mean you can't do anything about it?'

'If I can find out what caused it in the first place, there might be a chance. I just pray that I have enough time before the moment of catastrophe.'

'Catastrophe?'

'I use the word in its strict scientific sense,' he went on.

'If a dam is breached, the water comes through in a relative trickle at first; but then small cracks appear around the fracture; the trickle becomes a stream, augmented by even more new trickles; the dam is weakened even further; until

– catastrophe: the structure of the dam can't contain the pressure of the water any longer. It bursts. The countryside is flooded.'

He stopped speaking for a moment. He sighed. He bent his head and pinched the top of his nose between his finger and thumb, massaging it gently.

54

Sometimes, thought Sarah, it wasn't difficult to believe that the Doctor was over seven hundred years old. He was suddenly looking as if he carried the weight of the centuries on his shoulders.

'You all saw what has been trying to get through those cracks,' he said at last. 'When the catastrophe point is reached and the barrier gives way, this planet will be flooded by all the evil in N-Space; all the fear, greed, anger, hate; all the sheer malevolence the world has experienced since the beginning of time will pour out into the world in an overwhelming torrent.

'And, at the moment, I have no idea how to stop it.'

55

Five

Umberto Callanti – and his father before him – had served the Barone – and *his* father before him – for most of his seventy-nine years. The master's long dead parent had if anything been even more eccentric than his son – as witness the time he had invited his favourite mule to

dinner, entertaining it with a critique (philosophical rather than literary) of La Divina Commedia, with particular reference to Dante's descent into the Inferno, whilst Umberto's father served the creature with oats on a chased silver dish. So it would have been difficult to surprise him.

So when the Doctor had politely asked him to bring two beds or couches and place them in the cloister of the rear courtyard, where he appeared to be constructing some sort of wireless apparatus – Umberto's brother had built one in 1929, so he knew what they looked like – he had contented himself with a request for help. His back was hurting already and he had quite enough on his hands, especially now that the two youngsters had been invited to stay. At least the Signorina had made her own bed.

'But what are they for, Doctor? They're jolly heavy, I can tell you that!' said the young Signore as he dropped his end of the second truckle bed they had carried down the spiral staircase from the store room in the East Tower. He 56

had done nothing but grumble ever since he was asked to help.

'Thank you, Umberto, I'm most grateful,' said the Doctor.

Umberto bowed and departed for the kitchen, waiting until he was safely hidden behind the Doctor's blue box (which had mysteriously transported itself from the great hall) before he stopped and put his hands on his back to stretch his aching spine.

'Well, I'm bushed!' said Jeremy, sitting down on the little low bed he'd just brought down all those stairs. He didn't get any thanks, he noticed – and he'd had the difficult end too, at the front. And why hadn't the Brigadier volunteered to give a hand, instead of just hanging around chatting to the Doctor? And where was Sarah, for that matter?

He swung his legs up, lay back and stretched out with a sigh of relief.

'I shouldn't lie there if I were you,' said the Doctor, who was rigging a network of wires across the arched ceiling of the cloister above his head. 'Not unless you want a trip into N-Space.'

57

What! With all those nasties trying to get at you?

Jeremy leapt to his feet and backed away. The Doctor laughed. ‘It’s all right. The power isn’t attached yet.’

Typical, thought Jeremy. Scaring a chap out of his wits just for a joke.

‘One thing I don’t quite understand, Doctor,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Your explanation of ghosts seemed to make a sort of sense, I suppose –’

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. Jeremy could see he didn’t like that.

‘Yes, well…’ went on the Brigadier, who was clearly aware that the Doctor wasn’t too chuffed. ‘It’s those beasties. The – ah – the fiends. You seemed to imply that they share N-Space with the spirits who are stuck there. Are we to take it that the expression N-Space is just a euphemism for plain old-fashioned Hell?’

‘Not exactly,’ said the Doctor. ‘Here, Jeremy, catch hold of this.’ He passed a wire under the pair of beds, came round to take it and threaded it through the tangle of wires climbing up the nearest pillar like the tendrils of a creeping plant.

‘You see,’ he went on, ‘the spirits, as you call them –

the selves? – aren’t condemned to stay there by a vengeful God or anything like that. If they’re condemned at all, it’s only by their own ignorance – their ignorance of the truth of 58

the situation; and by their clinging to the things they can’t give up, all the cravings and addictions; the repressions and the aversions.’

While he was speaking he repeated his actions. He seemed to be building an untidy cage around the beds, thought Jeremy, scrabbling underneath for the end of the wire.

‘Fear and despair; the anguish of loss; the cankers of envy, hate and greed; all the forms of inturning agony you can think of can cause a person to be stuck. But in the end, most do manage to see what they’re doing to themselves and then they can move on, into the light.’

‘But what about the fiends, Doctor?’

He stopped his work and looked gravely at the Brigadier.

‘The N-Forms. Yes. You know already, Lethbridge-Stewart, that the power generated by negative emotion can have enormous potential for evil.’

‘Do I?’ said the Brigadier.

‘It was the force used by the Master to raise the last of the Daemons.’

‘Ah. Yes. Devil’s End. Quite right.’

Still the Doctor had not started to work again. ‘What do you think must be the inevitable consequence of the amount 59

of negativity generated by all those selves who have managed to quit N-Space?’

‘Not – ah – not good?’

‘Not at all good. Just as the joy of the light is manifest in the shape of angels or devas or whatever, as Sarah was telling us earlier, so the power of the darkness is imaged in the form of fiends.’

Was he telling them that the fiends weren’t really, really real? thought Jeremy. Only images? Sort of projected, like at the pictures, sort of?

‘Ah,’ said the Brigadier, his face clearing. ‘Not real, then. Just the appearance of reality? Right?’

‘Wrong. They’re no less real than all other living beings in the world of appearances. No less an illusion, true, but that’s something else.’

As the Doctor turned away and picked up another coil of wire, Jeremy heard the patter of scurrying feet, ever and anon giving way to a hiccup of a skip, as though the runner was trying to overtake himself.

‘Alistair! My boy! He is acoming! I have him espied with my I-spy-glass from the top of the tower! He is acoming up the hill; like the Jack and the Jill he is acoming!’

60

‘Calm down, Uncle,’ said the Brigadier to the little shock-headed figure. ‘I take it you mean the Vilmio fellow.

Leave it to me. I’ll deal with him.’

He put a comforting hand on the old man’s shoulder and led him away, saying, ‘It might be as well if you kept out of the way. I suggest you go to your room. And don’t worry.’

As the Brigadier made his way via the hall to the entrance lobby

below, he heard the jangling of the bell. So he'd arrived had he, he thought grimly, this – this gangster who'd scared the wits out of a helpless old man like a fifth form bully terrorizing a new bug in the playground. He was quite looking forward to meeting him.

He heard the door creak open and the murmur of Umberto's voice, answered by the rumbling tones of an American: 'Don't mess with me, you old bum.'

The Brigadier's lips tightened and he quickened his step. Again he heard Umberto's polite murmur and arrived in time to see the giant figure, with an oath, roughly push the old butler aside and advance into the lobby.

'Can I help you?' said the Brigadier, his mind professionally busy categorizing the newcomer: Six foot seven in height (at least) and the breadth was muscle, not fat. Dark hair, tanned rugged face. Black leather glove on the right hand. Mohair suit – or vicuna? Cutaway shirt 61

collar, silk tie; soft leather moccasins, Gucci probably.

Moving on his toes like a boxer…

'Can I help you?' he repeated, when he received no answer. The big man had stopped, his arms slightly lifted as if ready for a punch-up. A surprised frown flicked across his brow.

'Who are you?'

'My name is Lethbridge-Stewart,' replied the Brigadier.

'I represent my uncle, Mario Verconti.'

'Old Dopey here takes me for some sort of a mug. He's been trying to tell me the Barone's not in the castello.' The stillness of the man was more menacing than any threatening gesture. The Brigadier unconsciously swayed onto the balls of his feet, ready for a sudden move.

'Not at home. An accepted fiction in polite society. He is not at home to you, sir.'

He was answered by a growl of anger and a slight twitch of the gloved hand.

‘Thank you, Umberto, that will be all.’

‘Si, signore.’ The servant accepted his dismissal with a relieved nod and backed warily out of sight. The two men waited in silence, their eyes locked together, until he had gone.

62

‘I have to tell you, Mr Vilmio, that neither you nor your propositions are welcome. The island of San Stefano Minore is not for sale and there’s an end of it.’

The black brows were lowered even more. ‘You’re wrong, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart. This is only the beginning. I want this island, this castle; and I’m used to getting what I want. Whatever it takes. You might say that persuasion is my speciality; and I’m good at my job.’

The Brigadier still had not moved. ‘There’s no more to be said. Good day, Mr Vilmio.’

The battered face flushed a darker shade of tan. ‘I’m not one of your goddam servants. You British seem to think you still own the earth. Listen to me, feller. The time will come when your uncle will be on his knees, begging me to allow him to sell me the place.’

Now the Brigadier did move. He crossed to within a couple of feet of the seething Max Vilmio. His face was stem.

‘Yes, I am British, a British officer,’ he said. ‘What’s more, I happen to be a representative of the United Nations.

Even if I weren’t involved personally, I should feel it my duty on both counts to oppose the threats of scum like you.’

For a moment it seemed as if he had gone too far, but then the big man turned and walked away.

63

The Brigadier watched him until he had crossed the bailey, passed through the main gate and turned the corner by the orange grove before he gently closed the door and allowed himself to feel the fear.

Sarah hardly seemed to welcome Jeremy’s offer of help, when he arrived in the dusty library bitterly complaining that the Doctor had sent him away ‘with a flea in his ear, just for dropping an amplifier

thingy when it was hardly his fault there were wires all over the place, now was it?'

She looked up from the heavy leather-covered book she was studying. 'I've never been able to work out what fleas have got to do with ears,' she said vaguely, and returned to her book. Jeremy wandered across and peered over her shoulder. Solid Latin. What was the point of having a book in Latin?

'What's the point of having a book all in Latin?' he said.

'You're as bad as Alice,' said Sarah, '"What's the use of a book without pictures and conversations?" It's very interesting, as a matter of fact. A medieval "Lives of the Princes of Calabria". Not much help, though.'

'You mean you can understand it?'

'Enough. Languages were my thing.'

64

'Well, you've certainly been jabbering away to the jolly old wopperoos for the last few days as if you were a senorita yourself.'

'The word is signorina,' she said, 'and I suggest you find something useful to do instead of making racist remarks.'

Back on the elder sister kick, was she? She was no fun at all when she got onto that. He turned away and surveyed the shelves which covered the walls from floor to ceiling, stacked solid, and the books for which there was no room piled on the floor. There must have been thousands of books.

'Alice who?' he said.

But Sarah had turned to the next book in her pile and was already immersed. Jeremy climbed on to the bottom step of the mahogany stepladder fitted with wheels (the only way to reach the highest shelves) and leaned on the little platform at the top.

'What are we supposed to be doing, anyway?'

'Mm? Hey! Listen to this. "and it is said that in the Castello di San Stefano Minore" – that's us – "…the apparition of a young virgin…" – no, "maiden" is probably more like it – "…a young maiden can be seen walking the –

the ramparts", mourning her lost love." That must be our ghost!'

65

'Does it say anything about her topping herself?'

'Er, no. That's all.'

So what had that got to do with the price of coconuts?

Showing off again, that's all she was doing. 'That in Latin too?'

'No, this is a modern book. Well, late nineteenth century. A history of Sicilian castles. Published in Rome in 1872.'

66

Six

'Serendipity,' said the Doctor. 'As pretty an example as I've come across in a century of blue moons.'

'Not synchronicity?' said Sarah, a trifle crestfallen.

'That too. It must mean we're on the right track.'

'Going with the flow?' said Jeremy with a chortle.

'If you like.'

The Doctor had read the words on the piece of vellum (for that's what he said it was) and pronounced them an extract from an alchemical text – 'Not one I'm familiar with, though' – dating from the early middle ages.

'Thank you, Sarah,' he had said when she first gave it to him, taking a small book from his breast pocket and laying the fragment between its pages. 'This could prove invaluable. Well done.'

'Er… Actually, Doctor, it was sort of me who found it.

In a way.' And Jeremy explained about the accident; and that was when the Doctor called it serendipity.

'But what is it, serendipity? What does it mean?' said Jeremy.

'Making a fortunate discovery by accident. A coinage by my old friend

Horace Walpole,' the Doctor said. 'Clever chap in his own way. Invented the horror story, you know; what they called the Gothic Novel. Long before that girl 67

who seems to have got all the credit – what was her name?

Ann, wasn't it? Yes, of course, Ann, In fact Harry published *The Castle of Otranto* the year Ann was born. Pretty girl.

Bright too. Much too good for that boor Radcliffe.

As the Doctor was speaking, he was connecting a thick cable coming from the TARDIS to the strange looking apparatus he had constructed by the beds. Although it was basically electronic, Sarah could see within its depths some odd articles which seemed to be quite out of place. There was a coiled seashell, for example, of a nacreous blue; a peeled, hard-boiled egg (surely not!) with a metal knitting-needle stuck through it; and, just visible deep, deep inside, staring balefully out at her (it seemed), the skull of some sort of rodent, probably a rat.

'Ann Radcliffe?' whispered Jeremy to Sarah. 'Wasn't that the name on that book?'

'Ah, Brigadier,' said the Doctor, 'you're just in time.

I've just finished. It's all ready.'

'Is it indeed?' said the Brigadier. 'And what do you call that?'

The Doctor laughed. 'There you go again. Isn't it more important to know what it does?'

'I like to know what's what,' said the Brigadier. 'If I knew what its name was, I might glean some idea of what it's for.'

68

'I see. Well now, if I were to tell you that it's a Dimensional Transducer – an OB Dimensional Transducer

– would you be any the wiser?'

Sarah certainly wasn't – but then, judging by his expression, neither was the Brigadier.

'What does OB stand for?' he said stiffly,

‘Out of the Body,’ answered the Doctor. ‘When we use this apparatus to travel into N-Space this afternoon, our bodies will stay here. That’s what the beds are for.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said the Brigadier, ‘but did I hear you say something about “*we*” and “*travel*” and “*this afternoon*”?’

He sounded just like Ratty talking to Toad, thought Sarah. But it was no trip in a canary-yellow gipsy caravan that was on offer.

‘It’s too dangerous for me to go alone,’ said the Doctor.

‘With two of us there are double the chances of getting back; at least one of us should make it.’

‘And if neither gets back?’

‘Then Sarah and Jeremy will have a couple of corpses on their hands.’

A strangulated bleat from Jeremy.

Well, thank you very much! thought Sarah. And what then? Sit and wait for the biggest catastrophe of all time to hit?

‘Don’t worry,’ went on the Doctor. ‘It’s belt and braces.

I have every intention of being home in time for dinner.’

The Brigadier was clearly uneasy. ‘Look here, old fellow,’ he said (and Sarah had never heard him call the Doctor that before), ‘I don’t want to let you down, but I really do think I have to stay to keep an eye on Uncle Mario. This Vilmio person is quite beyond the pale. He’s capable of anything. But I shouldn’t want you to get hold of the idea that I was – ah – “chickening out”, I believe the expression is.’

The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘My dear chap…’ he said and paused. (They’re really quite fond of each other, thought Sarah. Aren’t men extraordinary?) ‘After all this time,’ the Doctor continued, ‘that’s the last idea I’d be likely to get hold of – and of course I understand. However, the difficulty is –’

‘I’ll go,’ said Sarah.

Her rash offer, which had startled her as much as the rest of them, was eventually accepted by the Doctor with a reluctance apparently

deriving from an old-fashioned gallantry.

For Heaven's sake, thought Sarah. She was a grown woman, wasn't she? She knew quite well what she was getting into, didn't she?

70

But then she realized, belatedly, that she hadn't a clue what it was that she'd so blithely volunteered for.

'So what happens now?' she said, hoping that the others couldn't hear the quaver she could feel in her voice.

'First –' said the Doctor, and cocked his head at the distant sound of an old-fashioned gong. 'First, we have lunch.'

So they all trooped off to the great hall to partake of Umberto's excellent cooking: a simple dish of medallions of lamb on a bed of spinach, garnished with black olives and baby potatoes. The blend of rosemary and garlic was judged to perfection – Jeremy even forgot to ask for mint sauce.

Taken all in all, Sarah reckoned that the Doctor's judgement had been right. If Wellington's army (or was it Napoleon's?) marched on its stomach – and Nelson's people braved the broadsides of Trafalgar with their innards lined with a suet pudding known as spotted dog (as her sailing teacher had assured her) then a gourmet luncheon was surely a fitting prelude to a projected trip into N-Space.

At least the butterflies in her insides had been lulled to sleep,

They awoke again briefly as she lay stretched out on the little cot next to the Doctor's. Her head was cradled in a metal half-cap and she was holding a couple of brass handles which, like the cap, were linked to the main circuit.

71

She clutched the grips tightly, thrusting aside the mental image of the rat's skull sneering toothily at her from its dark hole, and tried to concentrate on what the Doctor was saying.

'Relax,' he said. 'Close your eyes if you want to and just let it happen.'

It was like waiting for a general anaesthetic – or for the plane to take off on your first flight ever. Then came the tingling, in the palms and

the scalp – and now in the brain, so that everything was getting to be far away and the sound of the sea – the sea? – washing over her was quite drowning out the words of the watching Brigadier to Jeremy by his side.

'If they're not going to be back until dinner-time –'

The crescendo of the echoing silence took over and she was a thousand miles away.

But she wasn't. Abruptly, the Brigadier's voice was as loud as ever. The swashing noise stopped and she was wide awake; bright awake, feeling wonderful.

'– it gives us time to work out a plan of defence against this Vilmio chap.' The Brigadier's voice came from below her. She looked down and saw the top of his head next to Jeremy's; and past them, lying asleep it seemed, the body of the Doctor – and next to it her own body, as limp as Raggedy Ann and as lifeless.

72

'Off we go then.'

She turned a weightless head and saw that the Doctor was floating against the vaulting of the cloister a few feet away. Surprisingly, he was clutching the small psycho-probe he had used to reveal the barrier to them. How could that be? If they were only spirits… Her mind boggled and refused to finish the thought. For a moment her mind swum with a sort of vertigo, and she felt as if she must fall.

'You'll soon get used to it,' the Doctor said. 'It's a bit like the weightlessness you get in primitive space craft. And as for this…' – he held up the probe –'… if you know how, small physical objects can go through the barrier. Think of the objects – stones and so on – that drop out of nowhere in the odd poltergeist case.'

It was only as he floated away towards the clifftop (and she found herself following with no conscious volition) that she realized-that he had answered her thought as if she had spoken it aloud.

Now they were out in the open, by the ruined wall. The Doctor, seemingly as solid as ever, was standing on the grass, pointing the probe at the pile of stones. As he pulled the trigger, and the flaw in the barrier started to glow with the flickering light she had seen before, Sarah landed beside him. How could she feel the fluttering in

her stomach when 73

her stomach was fast asleep, along with the rest of her body?

‘It’s all a matter of belief,’ the Doctor said. He was thought reading again.

Before she could follow up his remark, however, he moved forward (was he walking or floating? It didn’t seem to matter) towards the light and into it, as calmly as if he were walking through the front door of his own home. Sarah took a deep breath and came after him.

The light swallowed her into itself-and yet, when she found that she could still see through its blinding effulgence it was only to realize that compared with the light at the end of the tunnel (what tunnel?) it was more like darkness. (‘I could show you hills in comparison with which you’d call that hill a valley!’ Wasn’t that what the Red Queen had said?)

But as she sailed exultantly towards the bliss of the radiance ahead, she heard the Doctor’s voice loud in her ear:

‘No!’ he commanded. ‘Stop!’

She became aware that he was in front of her, barring her way; and the light was fading, fading. The walls of the tunnel melted – no, that wasn’t right – it was as if they cracked – no, opened up – or perhaps ‘decayed’ would be a better word; but how could that be?

74

She was standing in the bleak unwelcome of an empty landscape stretching to a far horizon on every side. A lowering sky, almost purple in colour, was cut by sharp stabs of lightning; the ominous rumble of thunder by distant shrieks and wails, and shouts of incoherent rage. Yet there was no one in sight but the Doctor.

‘I nearly lost you then,’ he said; and she could feel the depths of his concern.

‘This is a dreadful place,’ she said, looking around apprehensively. Yet what she feared most, the strange fiends which had been haunting the castello, were nowhere to be seen.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’ll turn up.’

Thanks a bunch, she thought.

The Doctor looked down at the probe in his hand, apparently checking the readings on the dials. Sarah felt obscurely cheated. This was nothing like her expectations.

'There's nobody here but us. I thought you told us that –'

'Look again,' he said.

She followed the direction of his eyes, turning to look back the way they must have come. Flickering into view, like a glimpse of moonlight through wind-scattered clouds, she saw the broken castello wall at the top of the cliff; and beyond, a figure in white, calling for her lost lover; calling, calling. For a single moment, the sight was as real as her 75

memory of the castle she had left behind (but how real IS a memory?) and then it was gone and there was nothing but the desolation.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'It's all in the mind. And yet that's upside down. What is the mind, after all? A smear of possibilities; when you try to nail it down it's gone, like your poor lady.'

'She disappeared like a dream,' said Sarah.

'Very like a dream,' said the Doctor. 'But is it your dream or hers?'

'You mean that none of this is real?'

'Nothing could be more real. Matter and mind are fundamentally the same. And yet… and yet…' He stopped speaking, and shook his head. Was it merely that he didn't know how to explain to her, or was he as puzzled as she was? He spoke again.

'What is mind? No matter –'

'– and what is matter? Never mind!' She finished the schoolgirl joke for him; and they both laughed.

He looked again at the psycho-probe, and carefully turned a small knurled knob, watching the dial above it.

'Good, good,' he said. 'My hunch was right. There are indications of a massive shock.'

He turned the instrument some ninety degrees and consulted the dial

again. 'Come on,' he said.

76

Again they were floating – no, flying – through the air.

Sarah could feel the wind on her cheeks as they sped along just above the ground. Curiously, they were not following a straight course but every so often swooped from one sode to the other, like ungainly birds, though as far as Sarah could make out always travelling in the same general direction.

'Keep looking,' said the Doctor.

What was he on about? Was he telling her to look where she was going? Of course she would.

But as she followed him on a steep curve to the left and then an S-bend to the right, she realized what he meant.

Fleetingly, she became aware of what it was that he was dodging on this occasion: a group of three figures, seated on the ground in attitudes which spoke of the utmost despair, who flickered into existance and then were lost again.

It was as if there was a knack to be learnt, a way of seeing out of the corner of the mind.

It must be like those optical illusions, where you can suddenly see a hidden face or whatever, thought Sarah, as more and more of the emptiness was peopled by the sad, angry, desolate inhabitants of N-Space, dressed in clothes from every conceivable period. There were only a few glimpses at first, but as she got the idea of how to look, they stayed. Not only people, but also where they lived. (If that's the word, she thought.) She saw an ancient Greek temple; a 77

medieval street; a lavish country park; the whole compendium of scenes from the long tale of humankind –

sometimes isolated, sometimes overlapping. Yet Sarah never felt that she was seeing one thing through another. It was more as though they were both in the same place at the same time.

Then, with a jolt which brought her flight to an abrupt halt, she saw the fiends. The Doctor also came to a stop and held up a hand in caution.

There were two of them. The larger was very like a small whale (a relative expression: it was some thirty feet long) with the teeth of a shark; that is, if a whale could have managed to grow a full complement of legs topped off with dinner-plate-sized hooves. The other fiend, a nimble slug a mere twelve feet in length, spotted them shortly after they saw it chase a running figure – a man in a frock coat at full gallop, clutching a stove-pipe hat to his head – catch him and swallow him at a gulp.

Two of them, both swaying slightly as they waited and watched.

No, there were three! For as Sarah threw a panic glance behind, she saw a creature like a spiny sea urchin, a ball of yard-long spikes, rolling steadily towards them, the blood-red eyes on stalks never turning away, never blinking.

78

It was at this point that she regretted having taken the Brigadier's place.

79

Seven

'Stand perfectly still!'

Sarah didn't need him to say that. She was frozen to the spot, hardly daring to breathe (and even at such a moment, the thought skimmed across her mind: why did she need to breathe at all?).

The Doctor didn't stand still though. On the contrary, he seemed almost to be dancing. With a running skip and a jump, he advanced on the whale-like creature and thrust his face full at its great muzzle. 'Boo!' he said; and spun on his heels and bounced – yes, bounced was the only word –

towards the spiny ball approaching from the rear.

With a deep gurgling roar, the immense beast took off after him. In spite of its lumbering bulk, it sprang forward on the thick muscles of its hind legs and nearly caught him in its very first bound.

But the Doctor was prepared. With a leap Nureyev or Nijinsky would have been hard put to emulate, he side-stepped its rush – and at once changed direction towards the giant slug, whose swaying face seemed

almost bewildered by this unexpected turn of events.

With a tripping rush, the Doctor darted forward and slapped the fiendish monster on its head, Just between its 80

protruding eye-stalks, and immediately sprang backwards to avoid the slashing sweep of its slavering jaws.

Turning, he abandoned his tantalizing, taunting dance and took off at sprinter speed, straight for the other two, with the slug in close pursuit.

What was the man doing? Sarah s whole being was shrinking back inside itself, as if she were trying to make herself as small as possible.

The slug so nearly touched her as it brushed past that she was almost overwhelmed by the stench of decay which came from its body.

The Doctor reached the other two – and shot between them as if he were breasting an Olympic tape. The savage swipe of the shark teeth, snapping too late to catch him, seized a mouthful of spines instead – just as the pursuing slug-fiend arrived and cannoned into the pair of them.

'Come on!' cried the Doctor, as he jumped clear over the shrieking tangle of flesh. He gripped Sarah's hand and away they went again, flying higher than before and so fast that the wind snatched away Sarah's breath.

As they flew, she could hear behind the receding snarls of rage and pain as the creatures tore at each other's bodies, Beneath her, what? Nothing but a blur.

Just when she was beginning to feel that if she didn't get a proper breath she might explode – implode? – what 81

did the word matter for God's sake! – the Doctor slowed down, releasing his grip on her hand, and landed in a grove of leafless trees.

'Curious,' he said mildly. 'One wouldn't expect to see three of them together so far away from their usual feeding ground. The odd wanderer, yes. But three!'

Sarah's breath was coming in deep painful gulps and in no way could she have voiced her thought. Feeding ground?

Why should creatures from N-Space need to feed, for Pete's sake? They were spirits, weren't they? Or images or whatever? Where did feeding come in?

Of course, she'd left out of account the Doctor's new-found telepathic ability. 'Quite right,' he said. 'Quite wrong too., Those creatures are solid enough to give you a nasty nip.' Nip! She a seen the slug thing swallow a man whole!

'They're as real as you and me,' went on the Doctor.

But they re nothing but the embodiment of complexes of negative emotions, as I told you. They lack one thing – and it's the very thing they inevitably crave; and that's a self, a personality. So in the usual human grabbing way they try to absorb the selves they see around them; and how can they do that except by eating them?'

'I don't understand,' said Sarah, who was beginning to breathe more easily. 'That poor man was dead already, wasn't he?' The Doctor nodded. 'Well he can't die again, 82

can he? But if that thing has eaten him…' Her thought slipped away.

'He would know the agony of being eaten,' said the Doctor, 'because, deep down, he believes he deserves punishment for the things he's done in his former life. But he'll wake up again and find himself reliving his last hours, just as before.'

Sarah's mind boggled. How could somebody die over and over? In any case… 'So if it had eaten me,' she said, 'it wouldn't have hurt? I mean, I don't believe I deserve punishment for anything I've done in my life.'.

'Don't you?' said the Doctor. 'Congratulations.'

It might have been easier if he hadn't been looking at her in such an understanding way; she couldn't hold his eye; and she blushed.

Jeremy sat on the low wall of the cloister with the warm spring sun on his back, and looked at the deathly-still figures on the truckle beds. He was, as usual, feeling put upon.

Even the Brigadier, who was quite a decent chap really, didn't seem to think him capable of actually contributing anything. 'Well now, I need to discuss the whole situation with my uncle,' he'd said. 'I'm not quite sure what this Vilmio fellow will try next.'

83

The night before, after Sarah had gone to bed, Jeremy had listened in a perfunctory manner (his attention being more firmly fixed on Umberto's excellent avocado and tomato sandwiches) while the Brigadier had explained to the Doctor the unfortunate position his uncle found himself in.

'Council of war, you mean?' said Jeremy, in an intelligent sort of way.

'I hope it won't come to that,' said the Brigadier.

'Er – shall I come? I mean, three heads better than two and all that.'

The Brigadier looked at him the way people always did when he made suggestions. 'Thanks all the same, but it might be just as well if you stayed here and kept an eye on these two. All right?' And off he'd gone.

Just like a blasted prefect ordering around a third-former. It wasn't as if he hadn't been a prefect himself.

Well, nearly. A sixth-former, anyway; and if his father hadn't taken him away after the A-level mocks, he'd have been a prefect for certain next term. A definite maybe, at the very least.

He hunched himself up into a grumpy bundle and hugged his knees with a fierce intensity.

He'd show them. One of these days.

84

To Sarah's surprise, when they eventually arrived at their destination, it turned out to be the very castle they had left. But now it was whole.

'What did you expect?' said the Doctor, as he floated towards the clifftop. 'That's why we came; to trace any disturbance of the N-Space barrier in the past history of the castello. There seem to have been two. Whenever they turn out to be, they're bound to be some way away.'

'You mean, we've been flying back into the past?'

'Not exactly. Time and space have a very different relationship here from what you're used to.'

He raised the scope and pointed it at the wall, pulling the trigger. The strange glow appeared again, but this time it was more concentrated. There were no radiating lines of light at all. ‘You see?’ he said. ‘The crack is there, but it hasn’t developed to the point of catastrophe yet. Indeed it suffers from a certain amount of ambiguity.’

‘Eh?’

‘It’s difficult to tell whether or not it has suffered the fatal shock as yet. Well, there’s only one way to find out.’

He moved forward and into the light. Sarah followed and found herself on the other side, in the courtyard. So that was what it felt like to float through a wall! Or rather, what it didn’t feel like. For there was no sensation at all, any more than there is in the unconscious blink of an eye.

85

To her surprise the wall was more than just a wall, having a substantial platform behind it which formed the roof of some sort of a store room, or outhouse, with steps by it going up to the top of the perimeter wall.

‘If we flew in the right direction, could we go into the future and all?’ said Sarah.

‘No, no, no. Of course not. Time in N-Space parallels the earth’s time. How could you have a ghost of somebody who hasn’t been born yet?’

They had passed through the door into the house and were sailing down the corridor which led into the main body of the building. Sarah suppressed a chuckle. Would he get lost again?

‘Yes, I was a bit hard on Lethbridge-Stewart, wasn’t I?’

said the Doctor, stopping and consulting the dial on his vectorscope. ‘Never mind, this will take us straight to the beginning of the perturbation in the psycho-spatial matrix that has brought us here.’

Off they went again, taking a short cut straight through the walls of the corridors; into an elegant little sitting room and straight out again through the striped wallpaper; through another passage wall; and out into the very kitchen where Jeremy didn’t get his marmalade; to be greeted by a shriek and a crash of broken pottery.

86

‘Damn,’ said the Doctor, as they watched the maid-servant fleeing in terror. ‘We’re ghosts ourselves, of course.

Of a sort. Stupid of me.’

‘Wait for me!’ cried Sarah as the Doctor swooped through the door after the woman. The last thing she needed was to find herself abandoned in the past (the early nineteenth century, judging by the maid’s high-waisted dress) with nothing to do but the occasional haunting.

She caught up with the Doctor as he slowed to a stop just outside the entrance to the great hall. She could see through the half-open door. The servant was jabbering out an incoherent account of what she’d seen to a fattish middle-aged gentleman who’d been sitting by the fire reading a newspaper.

‘Nonsense, woman,’ he said. ‘Your imagination is playing games with you.’

‘No, Signore, it’s God’s truth. It was a man. He just appeared from nowhere. Dressed all in black with white hair and mad staring eyes.’

The Doctor, to Sarah’s surprise, turned and winked at her.

‘You’ve been listening to Signorina Louisa and her foolish tales,’ said the man.

‘No, no. I saw him, I saw him.’

87

‘You’ll be telling me next that the pots jumped off the table by themselves. To be sure, I’m getting a little tired of these fancies.’

The servant was screwing her apron into a little ball, so agitated was she, so intent on making her master believe her.

‘No, Signore! When the glasses flew across the room and broke themselves, we all saw it. Even Signor Berino.’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow and mouthed a word at Sarah. What was he trying to say? Potter something? Oh no, of course. Poltergeist!

‘And the walking cupboard? And the dancing saucepans? I’ll have no

more of it, do you hear? Go back to the kitchen and get on with your work.'

His voice softened as the woman dissolved into gasping tears. 'Begone with you,' he said. 'I'll tell Signor Berino not to stop the broken pots from your wages.' But she only sobbed harder.

'Come along,' he said, rising to his feet, 'I'll go with you. I'll warrant there's nothing more frightening in the kitchen than the old tabbycat.'

He threw the paper down and took her arm. She suffered him to draw her gently towards the door.

'Hide!' mouthed the Doctor. Sarah looked around wildly. Where? There just wasn't anywhere near enough.

But as she looked, she saw the Doctor melt into the wall behind him and with an inward grin at herself she followed suit through her own wall.

She found herself in, of all places, the library; though now it was clean and tidy with all the books in the right place. Right down the other end was sitting (luckily three-quarter turned away) a young female in a sprigged lilac dress, reading. Sarah kept very still.

'You can come out now,' she heard the Doctor s voice saying quietly; and when she returned, his head was sticking through the stones opposite for all the world as if somebody had shot him and mounted his stuffed head on the wall like a Bengal tiger.

'Nothing but a simple poltergeist, it seems,' he said, stepping out and going into the great hall.

'Now, if there were a youngster, an adolescent, in the castle we'd have our confirmation.'

'I just saw her. In the library. About fifteen, I'd say.'

'Well, there you are then,' said the Doctor, picking up the newspaper. Sarah caught a glimpse of one of the headings – you could hardly call it a headline. *The Corsican Tyrant Ailing*, it said.

'Eighteen eighteen,' said the Doctor. 'A time of hope: and a long way away from our other port of call. Ready?'

‘Where are we going now?’ asked Sarah.

89

Of course, they were going to the castle yet again – but a seemingly newer castle than either of the others, though it was difficult to see it in any great detail as they arrived during the hours of darkness.

Again the Doctor tested the opening with his scope; again it yielded a moderate glow; again they entered the castle through the wall into the courtyard.

This time, however, their trip was curtailed. Before they could reach the house door, the sound of hurrying footsteps came to their ears. With a gesture, the Doctor slipped into the shadow of the cloisters Sarah close behind him.

From the archway which led into the garden, a monk-like figure came scurrying, carrying with great care and even greater difficulty a small but heavy jar. It seemed as though his greatest fear was that the contents might spill over the rim – and yet he scuttled along as though the consequences of being late would be far worse.

They watched him disappear into the store-room under the wall.

‘Where have you been?’

The harsh voice could be clearly heard from inside. The Doctor pointed to the door, which had been left open. She nodded and followed him as he floated gently to the opening. Stopping when he stopped, she found that if she 90

went very close to the crack in the door hinge she could see inside and – of course! – she could melt herself into the stone and wood, so that she could see the whole candlelit room, without herself appearing.

‘Don t spill it, fool! The gold it cost me would buy your father’s farm. Aye, ten times over.’

The speaker, a large figure in a long robe, had the smooth waxen skin of one who had seen little daylight for some considerable time. He picked up a small spoon with a long handle and with slow deliberation took a measure of the contents of the earthenware jar. Sarah watched with fascination as he dripped the gleaming metallic liquid (surely it must be mercury, quicksilver) into a large mortar, whilst grinding with a heavy pestle. The gritty crunching smoothed to

a dull scraping; the spoon was empty.

The room, which seemed to be some sort of workshop, was lit by the glow from a furnace at the back. While the master continued mixing his concoction, the friar, if that was what he was, started to pump the bellows of the furnace. A large retort was dripping a dirty yellow substance into a bowl; some sort of distillation, apparently.

With eager hands, already prepared quantities of other substances were added to the pestle – a green powder, a pinch of black seed, two spoonfuls of a pale milky liquid –

and ground into the paste. At last, after adding a careful 91

measure of the ochre distillate, he gave the whole a brisk stir and poured it into a waiting crystal goblet.

He held it up to the light of the candle and seemed to be murmuring some sort of prayer. Yet surely, thought Sarah, if this was fifteenth or sixteenth-century Italy, as the clothes seemed to indicate, he would have crossed himself if he really had been praying.

He thrust the glass towards his servant. ‘Drink!’ he said.

‘No, master, no!’

‘What? I offer you a potion to cure you of all human ills; the secret draught of Hermes Trismegistus; the elixir vitae itself? And you spurn it? Drink, I say.’

‘I – I am afraid.’

His master stood and held the goblet to the trembling lips. With his other hand he drew a needle-pointed poignard from his belt and held it to his servant’s neck.

‘Drink,’ he said quietly.

The shaking man took the crystal in both hands, paused for a long moment and downed the ruby-red liquid in one.

Silence. Not a sound could be heard, not even the ever-present sea.

With a crash and a tinkle the goblet fell to the floor. The drinker put his hands to his throat and with a dreadful bubbling cry stiffened in a spasm which hurled him to the ground.

92

. With one last chocking gasp, the wretched man was still. His eyes were popping from his head and his tongue extruded from his mouth, blood streaming from it. His jaw, clamped tight, had bitten it nigh through.

He was, without a doubt, quite dead.

93

Eight

When Sarah thought about it afterwards, she decided it was rather dim of her to be so surprised at what happened next.

After all, since both she and the Doctor were, for all practical purposes, ghosts themselves (though what practical purpose could you put a ghost to, for Pete's sake?), it should have been obvious that she would see the ghost of the dead man float up from his body. Of course, she had been shaken to her core by the manner of his death. But that was no excuse.

At first, the figure was transparent; you could see through him in the traditional ghostly way. But as awareness came back into his face, like somebody waking up, so he appeared to become solid. For the first time, it crossed her mind that it was really rather curious that N-Bodies always seemed to appear fully dressed – including her own, thank goodness. But she seemed to hear the Doctor's voice in the depths of her mind, 'It's all a matter of belief' (A memory? Or was she starting to be telepathic too?) She glanced across to the other side of the doorway, where the Doctor was standing in the shadows, watching through the opening. But he was clearly intent on what was happening inside.

94

The alchemist – and this was even more surprising to Sarah, because he certainly wasn't any sort of ghost – could also see the wraith which was floating towards the wall of the little cell. His face was contorted with anger, and his voice as he snapped the word, 'Stay!', held all the frustration of thwarted obsession.

'I command thee and conjure thee that thou shalt obey me in all things,' he continued in a tone of barely suppressed rage. 'In the name of Astaroth, of Beelzebub, and of the great Lucifer himself, I command

thee!'

The man stopped and faced the towering figure. His face was all bewilderment. 'Of course, Master,' he said.

'Have I not always been faithful?'

He didn't realize that he was dead! He must have forgotten everything that had led up to his terrible end.

Sarah, utterly caught up in the drama which was unfolding before her, leant forward the better to see the expression on the master's face – and found herself floating out of the wall full into his view.

He turned at the movement, utter disbelief coming into his face, but before he could react further, the Doctor was by her side. He grasped her hand. 'Come on!' he said; and the pair of them shot backwards, through the half-open door, away across the courtyard to the cloistered darkness on the other side.

95

They stopped. Sarah was gasping with the shock, the suddenness of it.

'I'm sorry,' she managed to say.

'No harm done,' said the Doctor. 'I apologize for giving you such a shock. If I'd given him time to think…' He stopped, shaking his head at the thought.

'Why? What do you mean?'

'The fellow's a necromancer as well as an alchemist.

You saw how that poor creature was in his power. He could have enslaved you as well.'

The thought was overwhelming. Suddenly Sarah had had enough. 'Let's get out of here,' she said, and her body started to shake.

'We'll have to give him time to get over it,' answered the Doctor. 'We'd have to go right past that door to get away. In any case, I need more information. Let's go and see what we can find out.'

Reluctantly she followed him into the dark corridors, sparsely lit with torches.

‘Are you feeling better?’

‘I’ll survive.’

‘Good girl. Off we go then.’

Yes, she was feeling better. Better enough to be able to smile wrily at the fact that Sarah Jane Smith, bold investigative journalist, didn’t object at all to being told she 96

was a ‘good girl’ by the Doctor in that slightly patronizing manner he sometimes had. After all, there was a generation gap of something like seven hundred years!

After his experience with the kitchen-maid, he was much more cautious, peeping round comers (and out of walls) to make sure that the coast was clear – which quite often it was not. The castle was obviously the heart of a very busy community. There were not only servants, but soldiers in chain mail, monks like the one who died (‘They’re actually friars,’ whispered the Doctor), finely-dressed gentlemen and their ladies, and officials, mostly dressed in black robes, who were not quite gentlemen, but obviously of some importance in the household.

The conversations they overheard told them very little, being mostly trivial (like most conversations today, thought Sarah). But then they found themselves in a large room which was furnished with considerably more luxury than anything they had so far seen. There were rich tapestries hanging on the walls and the chairs were covered with embroidery of some complexity and beauty. Hanging over the fireplace was a portrait of a handsome young man.

Sitting by the smouldering log fire was a woman in a long robe, with a quite elaborate head-dress. She was dabbing at her eyes with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

97

‘I tell you, madam, it displeases me to see you weeping for him still. After so many years…’ The words were spoken by a grey-haired man who was sitting on a cross-legged chair on the other side of the fireplace.

‘I weep for us all,’ she replied. ‘I weep that his very inheritance should be in hazard to a stranger. Can this evil man – this sorcerer – be in truth your cousin?’

‘He seems to bear the proof. And he is no sorcerer, my lady, but a man of God.’

‘What blood is he? To bear the name of the Emperor – a German name – would seem to be unlikely. I think it false –

as false as the man himself.’

The man rose to his feet in evident irritation. Sarah shrank further back into the shadows. The Doctor held up a warning hand.

‘What can I do, woman? He came bearing letters from the Spanish court! Would you have me eject the man by force?’

‘I expect nothing from you, my Lord. A man who would watch his own son, his heir, walk to his death and lift no hand to stop him?’

They were obviously hearing the replaying of an old tune; the opening yet again of an ancient wound. The man was shaking his head as if in disbelief.

‘It was his Christian duty; his duty to his father to his Lord and to his God.’

‘What were the Moors to us? Was my son Castilian?

Better that their most Catholic Majesties’ – she spat the words – ‘should lose a thousand towns than I should lose my-my baby.’

‘Guido was a man. The taking of Granada was a crusade most worthy to be fought. Aye – and to die for.’

Sarah glanced across at the Doctor. Was all this of any use? Surely not.

He caught her eye. It was time to go.

‘Fourteen ninety-two.’

‘What about it?’

‘What happened in fourteen ninety-two?’

They were on their way home. Old hands now, they were travelling across the variegated landscape of N-Space chatting as casually as commuters on the 8-15.

‘In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue!’

‘Why, so he did,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’d quite forgotten that. What else?’

As well as she could in the circumstances, Sarah shrugged. She hadn’t a clue.

99

‘Their most Catholic Majesties, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile –’

‘Columbus’s pals.’

‘Columbus’s pals. In fourteen ninety-two they managed to kick the last of the Arabs out of Spain. Granada was the last town to fall.’

So that was it. He was finding out the period.

‘Exactly. If that sad lady – I doubt if she was fifty years old – if her son died in the battle for Granada, our visit must have been somewhere near the turn of the century. And that’s near enough for the TARDIS to be able to take me back there. See?’

‘Mm.’

Not me, mate; us.

‘Oh, and by the way – when we get back into our usual bodies, I shan’t be able to read your mind any more.’

Sarah grinned. She couldn’t get away with anything.

‘I shall be honoured to have you come along,’ said the Doctor.

‘Why we gotta go to San Stefano Piddle-in-the-Wind, honey? Why can’t we go to Palermo? You could take me to that Rosario’s again.’

Maggie looked up from her handmirror. He wasn’t even listening. Just standing there by the guard rail staring 100

through those goddam glasses, with that creep Nico at his shoulder as usual.

‘What’s with this castello, anyway?’ She returned to the looking glass, tilting the yachting cap to an even more nineteen-thirtyish saucy angle on the blonde bubbles.

It was a day for going to sea, especially on the mini-liner which was Max Vilmio's yacht, with its expanses of silver white deck, striped awnings, chrome-plated fittings and Art-Deco saloons. It was a day for having champagne for breakfast; for swimming topless in the deck pool; for displaying bronzed limbs to a covertly admiring crew of libidinous seamen; all of which she had done with alacrity and glee.

'Get some more clothes on,' he grunted. 'We're going to tie up to the quay.'

She stood up and walked to the doorway which led below. She turned back. 'Why don't you tell me what's going on, sugar? P'raps I could help.'

She could feel his dead eyes running up and down her; she stood silent, hand on tilted hip, chin up, tits out, letting her body do its work.

'Maybe you could at that,' he said at last.

Jeremy watched the huge boat come alongside with a delicacy which wouldn't have cracked an egg, and 101

considered whether it would be a good idea to have another cioccolata sorpresa.

The little gelateria had come up trumps. Just when he'd really felt the absolute necessity of having an immediate ice-cream fix, it had opened its doors and offered him a monstrous confection of chocolate and coffee ice-cream, layered with butterscotch syrup, with a splodge of rum-soaked cake in the middle (which was the sorpresa), all topped with whipped cream and chopped walnuts.

The question was, having finished it, did he feel queasy? Or might he if he did have another?

It wasn't as if the first one had made him feel any better.

Sarah and the Doctor had come back in time for dinner the night before, as promised, but by that time he was as fed up as he'd ever known himself to be. His bottom was sore from sitting on the stone ledge – but he'd been afraid to move far in case they woke up and needed help or something; and the Brigadier hadn't come back for simply aeons, though he could hear him having some sort of argument with the little old gnome chap, his uncle.

Then, when things did start again, nobody even noticed him. Full of their adventures, yabbering away like a couple of bally chipmunks, they hardly spoke to him. True Sarah had asked the Doctor if he could come with them in the 102

TARDIS – but really! The last time he'd ended up nearly being eaten by that Gargan beast. As if he would! But when he'd said he didn't want to go, Sarah sort of turned her back on him.

After the sailors had tied the ropes to the thingies on the quay, there were various comings and goings, but nothing much of interest happening. At this rate he might just as well have another ice-cream and settle matters experimentally. But then he became aware of the Brigadier coming down the hill, with a thunderous expression.

Just in case, Jeremy drew back into the shelter of the potted palm by his table. Over many years, he'd perfected the technique of keeping out of trouble by staying out of sight.

The Brigadier hailed one of the crew members who was carrying something back to the boat. Jeremy couldn't hear what they said to each other, but afterwards, the Brigadier looked even more angry.

'Lethbridge-Stewart!'

The Brigadier walked over to meet the Doctor, who'd followed him down the hill, and they ended up only a matter of yards from Jeremy's hide. He peeped through the leaves and wondered whether he ought to join them. A bit late now, perhaps.

103

'Your uncle told me you'd come down here. What's up?'

'Vilmio again. The blighter's had the nerve to come and set up camp on our blasted doorstep, that's what's up. Uncle saw him coming through that telescope of his.'

The Doctor looked as though this news had as much import as reports of light showers to be expected after lunch.

'Mm. Yes, well. If you stick it out, there's nothing much he can do, is there? Just go on saying no.'

'You haven't met him, Doctor.'

‘No,’ the Doctor said. ‘And I’m afraid I’m going to have to forgo that pleasure. Sarah and I are ready to leave, and there are one or two things I’d like to clear up before we set off.’

Their voices faded as they walked away up the hill.

Jeremy was about to follow at a discreet distance (if he said goodbye to Sarah perhaps she’d stop being so beastly to him) when he became aware of two more people coming from behind the trattoria and speaking in undertones.

‘It has to look like an accident, okay?’

Jeremy froze.

‘Si, signore. The one with the moustache?’

The large man frowned. ‘Are you dumb or something?

The one he called the Doctor; the one with white hair. And 104

make sure you get it right. If he’s still there on the twenty-first… Don’t come back until you’ve fixed him good. He’s in my way.’

The one who was dressed up like a monk nodded and started to move towards the road to the castle.

‘Not yet, idiot! You want them to see you?’

He turned and moved towards the yacht. After a moment of indecision, the little man pattered after.

‘Sarah! Wait!’

She turned in the doorway of the TARDIS.

‘For Heaven’s sake, Jeremy! What’s going on? Have you changed your mind?’

But Jeremy, who had run all the way from the harbour, stumbling and staggering as he neared the top of the steep hill, running on wan and watery legs through the long corridors to the courtyard, had used up all his available breath in his cry to her.

‘No, no… It’s the… It’s the Doctor. That…’ He ran out of puff yet again.

‘Look, he’s started doing his stuff in there. I can’t stop him. Lord knows what would happen.’

Jeremy took a couple of deep breaths. ‘That – that Max Vilmio chap. The one who’s nobbling poor old Mario.

He’s…’ Again he had to stop.

105

‘Well? He’s what? What about him?’

‘He’s sending somebody to kill the Doctor. I heard them talking. A sort of monk chap. We’ve got to warn him!’

Sarah looked at him as if he’d gone totally bonkers.

‘Okay, okay, I’ll tell him. But it’s not as if he’s going to be in much danger where we’re going, now is he? Not that sort, anyway.’

An irate voice came from inside. ‘Sarah! Are you coming or aren’t you?’

‘Coming!’ And with a sort of ‘tut’ and a shake of the head, she disappeared inside. The doors started to shut.

Suddenly Jeremy couldn’t bear it. ‘Wait!’ he cried. ‘I’ve changed my mind! I’ll come too!’

But his only answer was the elephantine song of the TARDIS as she vanished from sight.

He turned away; but his eye was caught by a movement in the shadows. ‘Who’s that?’ he called.

There was no answer; and as he moved over to have a closer look, he saw that there was nobody there.

Yet, as he wandered disconsolately back through the long corridors, he couldn’t shake the idea from his mind that he had in fact caught a glimpse of Max Vilmio’s unlikely hit-man.

106

Huh! What a load of tommyrot, thought Jeremy. After all, he could hardly have just vanished through the wall, could he?

Nine

'Yes, yes. Thank you,' said the Doctor in an abstracted way when Sarah told him what Jeremy had said. He was intently studying some dials on the console of the TARDIS

and making unrecognizably small adjustments to the controls beneath them.

'Jeremy, Yes,' he continued in the same tone. 'Nice enough boy, in his way, but he really ought to…' He suddenly stopped and looked up, startled.

'What did you say?'

'Me? Nothing.'

'Just now. What did you say just now? About the Brigadier's American?'

'I said that Jeremy said that this man Vilmio had sent somebody to kill you.'

He returned to his knobs. 'Well, well, well. So it looks as if Lethbridge-Stewart is right about him. But why me, I wonder? I shouldn't have thought I constituted a threat to him.'

He stood up, obviously dismissing the question from his mind. 'Now come on,' he said, 'you haven't got much time to get changed. You'll find a suitable outfit in the twenty-third room on the right down the fourth passage on the left –

or is it the twenty-fourth down the third? Don't get lost.'

Now what was he on about? thought Sarah. 'We're going to a fancy-dress ball, right? What do you suggest? A bunny-rabbit? I'd quite fancy a circus clown, myself.'

You surprise me, Sarah. I should have thought it obvious that you can't pass yourself off as a young lady of the period dressed in jeans.'

Ah. Yes. She'd slipped a small cog, there.

‘Yes, of course. Only joking,’ she said lamely. ‘Early fifteen-hundreds, that’s what you said, isn’t it? Snoods and wimples and stuff.’

He looked at her as if she needed a complete refit, a ten-thousand-mile service. ‘I’ve come to the conclusion,’ he said (and his tone implied, ‘and why haven’t you?’), ‘that the events we witnessed were quite enough to have registered as a discontinuity on the scope. It’s surely far more likely that the barrier was breached in 1818. The poltergeist must have been the beginning, as I’m sure you’ll agree.’

Oh, yes. No doubt at all.

‘And don’t forget to leave your wrist-watch behind. It’s the biggest giveaway of the lot.’

Trying to look as if she’d known what he meant all along, she made her way out of the control room and counted her way to the right door. But was it? The room was full of crinolines and stuff. She made her way to the 109

alternative, counting carefully, and sure enough it was higgledy-piggledy with piles of Jane Austeny sorts of clothes.

By the time she’d turned herself into a refugee from *Pride and Prejudice* (she’d run a mile before she got mixed up with that creep Darcy, she thought), she was rather enjoying herself She’d tried three different dresses – her mother would have called them frocks – before settling on a fine pale green lawn, dead plain, which hung and swung with a satisfying elegance. She had to put her hair up, of course, but luckily it was just long enough. Good thing she hadn’t had it all cropped off to symbolize beginning a new life, as she nearly had. Topping it all with a small cloak and a bonnet which tied under the chin, she went back to the Doctor.

He hadn’t bothered to change. But then his usual costume wasn’t so very far away from the period. They’d just think him a trifle eccentric. So what else was new?

While she’d been away playing dressing-up games, the TARDIS had apparently arrived; and when they went outside, the Doctor was obviously very gratified to find that it had landed in the depths of the woods on the east side of the island, not far from a little beach. Sarah could see the castello high above them, romantically silhouetted against 110

the massing clouds piled up like mountain crags in an epic landscape

painting.

She started to climb the hill.

‘Not that way, my dear,’ said the Doctor. She couldn’t help noticing that his manner towards her had undergone something of a sea change since she’d become a demure young lady.

He strode down the hill towards the beach. ‘Why? What are we going to do?’ she said as she caught him up on the golden sand.

‘We’re going for a swim,’ he said, continuing into the choppy water without a break in his stride.

‘But Doctor…!’

He turned, nearly waist-deep already, to look at her standing at the edge of the surf like the timid maiden her appearance suggested. ‘Come on in, the water’s fine!’ He’d flipped at last. She’d have to humour him: go in for a paddle at least.

She started to slip off her pumps.

‘No, no! Don’t take anything off. That’d ruin everything!’

Oh well, in for a penny…

Wading after him, she was soon up to her shoulders.

She must have flipped as well! The water was chilly, to say 111

the least, and her flimsy dress and petticoat kept floating up and getting in the way of her walking.

‘Doctor, are you sure this is a good idea?’ she said earnestly. But the Doctor had a gleam in his eye and the bit between his teeth.

‘That’s the ticket. Now, dunk your head – no, bonnet and all!’ and as if to provide her with a good example he bent his legs and disappeared under the next wave.

Taking a deep breath, she followed suit, completely mistiming her return to the surface and ended up choking on a large mouthful of salt water.

‘Well done!’ he said, as she spluttered incoherent curses. ‘That’s excellent. Shall we go in now?’

All became clear about ten shivering minutes later when a small fishing boat came sailing round the headland to the north of the little bay. At once the Doctor started waving his arms and shouting for help; and Sarah had no trouble: it all playing her part, as this odd English gentleman explained to the concerned fishermen from Porto di Minore that he had had the misfortune, whilst out sailing with his niece, to suffer a capsize as a result of the rising wind; his boat, which was not all it should be (as he had to admit), had finally foundered in the deep channel, leaving them to swim to shore.

112

So it was that, being without doubt gentry, they were not only carried to the harbour and given hot goat's milk to drink, but also, wrapped in coarse grey woollen blankets, were escorted up the hill to the castle.

'I just don't get it, hon,' said Maggie. 'If you were ready to torch the mob…' She broke off as she saw the gathering ire in his face. 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was awake. So what? But if that's the way you want to play it, why start pussyfooting around with this Barone guy? If you want the castello, take the goddam thing.'

Now fully dressed (in a bikini), she was lying on a recliner on the after deck of the *Princess M.* (She'd been really touched when he called it that. It was almost like being given the boat.) Tequila Sunrise in her hand, with two straws, just as she liked it, she idly watched a seagull sitting on a chrome ventilator, preening itself. You'd have to be awful careful combing the feathers on your ass with a beak like that, she thought. She considered the information she'd been given. So he'd got a yen for the heap of stone at the top of the hill. So? What was the problem?

Max visibly controlled his temper. 'Okay,' he said, 'so you know about that. There's no need to broadcast it to the rest of the world. Round these parts, there's like two 113

different set-ups. Okay? You know what Cosa Nostra means?'

'You bet. It's the mob, the Mafia, the Families.'

'Yeah. But the words mean "our thing". And that's the way it's played. Our business is our business and if we keep it that way, nobody's gonna interfere. But the way it's getting these days, you start any rough stuff with the legit world, and before the smoke's blown away, you'll not only have the police knocking on your door, you'll have a Special Commissioner from Rome on your butt. I can win a war with a

bunch of farm-bred dumbos, but the whole Italian state?'

She took a suck at her cocktail. The seagull finished its toilet and hopped down to make an early lunch on a piece of toast spread with Beluga caviare she'd dropped. 'You scared or something?'

He refused to be teased. 'Sure I'm scared. I'm scared I'll move too quick and screw up. I've waited too long to risk it. But hang around, babe. It won't be long before I'll have them all jumping to my tune. And not just little Italia. I mean the whole goddam world.'

Again he had that vicious expression. It reminded Maggie of her father's face as he gave her Mom the one blow too many, the belt across the side of the head which finally killed her.

114

'So,' she said brighdy, 'what is it you want me to do?

Huh?'

'I want that castle. I need that castle. If I can get it legitimately I will, but if not…' He turned and looked up at the castle, the evil still in his face. 'I want you should use your talents on this Brit, this Lethbridge-Stewart guy. He knows more than he's pretending. Find out…' He stopped and looked her in the eye.

'Find out,' he went on, 'whether they've seen any ghosts up there.'

She almost dropped her glass. 'Ghosts?' she said incredulously.

'And find out whether they know about the twenty-first of May.'

'Whether they know what about the twenty-first of May?'

'That's what I want you to find out.'

He looked back at the castle. But now all the expression had gone from his face.

'Honey?' said Maggie, tentatively. 'Honey?'

He didn't answer. He just didn't seem to be there any more.

Maggie shuddered and surreptitiously crossed herself. It was the first time she'd crossed herself for over a decade.

115

Louisa Nettleton had been Paolo Verconti's ward for nearly three years. Her father, the Colonel, had managed to survive the long years of war, only to be slain by a stray musket ball minutes before Napoleon ordered his troops to lay down their arms and surrender to Wellington.

It was said by the doctor who had attended her last moments that her mother had died of a putrid infection; but the twelve-year-old Louisa knew better. Mama had died of a broken heart.

Fortunately, Powly, as she called her godfather, was also living in Tunbridge Wells at the time, and gladly assumed the responsibility he had accepted at her baptism, taking her with him when he returned to his ancestral home.

At first, as she told Sarah, she missed all her friends so much that she was like to have died of grief. But to live in a castle! A real castle with towers and turrets and galleries, just like the one in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*! – had Sarah read *Udolpho*? No? – and Powly was so kind; and had let her beloved Miss Grinley come too; and had all the new novels sent from the London booksellers; and once she'd learnt the language – it was very like to French, was it not?

– she'd felt quite at home – even though never to visit Bath again was unendurable; she doted on Bath. Mama had taken her every year. Did Sarah not dote on Bath?

116

'I hardly know it,' answered Sarah Jane Smith, who was looking unbelievingly at her reflection. Having been taken in hand by Louisa and lent an even more becoming gown (as Louisa called it) she had allowed the fifteen-year-old to have the fun of 'dressing her hair', entailing the application of heated irons which had produced a tumble of unlikely curls on the top of her head and a faint smell of scorched hair.

'There,' said Louisa, giving her creation a final pat.

'You look sweetly pretty again. Upon my honour, when I first saw you – rescued from a watery grave – you resembled the wild girl in *The Wreck of the Cerberus*! – and you know what a horrid end she came to!'

'I'm afraid I haven't read *The Wreck of the Cetberus* either,' said Sarah,

faintly. She looked like a Sindy doll, she decided.

‘You do not read novels, Miss Smith?’

‘Sarah, please.’

Louisa’s smile was pure rapture. ‘Oh, Sarah! I knew at once we were to be the dearest friends. It has been the most vexing thing you could imagine, to have no friends. Why, to be sure, Powly is a most agreeable man – and Miss Grinley an angel rather than a governess, I do assure you – but I have prayed this age for a real friend, a particular friend, a friend I could tell my secrets to!’

Sarah smiled at her. Even though they really had nothing in common, the idea wasn’t so preposterous.

Nobody could have helped liking the little creature. She was as full of life and love as a three-month-old puppy.

But she mustn’t forget why they had come. On the other hand, maybe Louisa’s ‘secrets’ weren’t just the usual prattle about boys and jealousies and who was whose best friend and all that stuff. How could they be, stuck as she was on this tiny island miles from nowhere? Perhaps her secrets were to do with the poltergeist. What if she were faking it, to get a bit of attention? How to bring the subject up, that was the question.

‘…and of all things,’ Louisa was saying, ‘I delight in tales of long lost heirs, and skeletons, and mad monks and ghosts! Does not the very word send a shiver through you?’

Well, thank you very much! thought Sarah. Her new friend had saved her the trouble. ‘Have you ever seen a ghost?’

‘Not seen, no. But we do have one in the castle. Is that not vastly pleasing?’

Ah, yes of course – the lady in white.

‘We must try to see her, while I’m here,’ said Sarah.

‘I doubt it is a lady, Sarah. An angry boy more like, a mischievous child cut off in the very spring of life, a naughty spirit who delights in tricks.’

118

‘Tricks?’

So Louisa told her of the things the ‘naughty spirit’ had done: five plates flung across the room to smash upon the wall; a scattering of pebbles – ‘from nowhere; they just appeared!’ – which made Miss Grinley fall and twist her ankle; Louisa’s pianoforte – her dear little pianoforte, brought from Napoli at vast expense – turned upside down onto its lid but, merciful Heavens, not in the least broken; the list seemed endless and was clearly to be catalogued in its entirety had it not been interrupted by the gong – the same gong, judging by its sound, which had summoned them yesterday (or getting on for a couple of hundred years in the future, whichever way you cared to look at it, thought Sarah).

‘Dinner,’ said Louisa.

Dinner? At five o’clock in the afternoon? Still, whatever they called it, it hadn’t come a moment too soon.

‘Powly becomes more vexed than you can conceive if we are late,’ said Louisa, leading the way out of the door.

‘Oh, and don’t speak of the ghost in front of him. He is a Rational Man’ – you could hear the capitals, thought Sarah, following her down the winding stairs – ‘or so he says.

Indeed, I sometimes feel that it may be true, alas. Talk of ghosts and such throws him into a pet.’

119

Sarah thought, Does it now? That’s going to put a spanner in the… No, a fly in the… Oh, for Pete’s sake! A fly in the Doctor’s works, a spanner in his ointment, whatever. He’s only come here to talk about ghosts.

In the event, however, even Paolo Verconti would surely have to allow the evidence of his own eyes to bear some weight in the court of rationality. For as the two girls walked in to the great hall, just as the great clock in the tower was striking five, to find the Doctor standing chatting to his host just inside the door, a sudden shower of stones –

rocks – some small, some as big as a fist, hammered the floor before them. If they had not been standing under the edge of the gallery,

they would inevitably have been struck.

Where on earth were they coming from? thought Sarah, looking up in a sort of awe; and then –

'Look out!' she screamed and threw herself with all her weight against the Doctor, knocking him – and Verconti –

flying. But she was too late to get out of the way herself The massive lump of masonry she had seen dislodge itself from the front of the gallery struck her a glancing blow and threw her to the floor, where she lay senseless.

The rain of stone had stopped. There was silence, except for Louisa's screaming.

Ten

'Thank you for saving my life,' said the Doctor gently, as Sarah opened her eyes.

'Tit for tat,' she said, and tried to sit up.

'No, don't try to move,' he said, as she grimaced with pain. You must be joking mate, she thought, as she winced back into the pillows. It was difficult to know which hurt more, her head or the top of her arm.

'You hit your head when you fell,' he went on, but there's nothing broken. You must have a touch of concussion and your shoulder's badly bruised. The best thing you can do for the moment is to rest. Now drink this.

It will ease the pain.'

'But Doctor, we've got to talk,' she said with feeble urgency. 'Have you found out anything? Is it all right to stay here? What if that kitchen-maid catches sight of you.

She'll recognize you as the ghost she saw – and then what?'

Sarah herself could hear the rising note of hysteria in her voice. For a moment she wanted to cry.

'Don't worry, we're quite safe. You're suffering from shock, that's all.

I'll get them to make you some sort of posset.'

What was a posset, for Pete's sake?

'I'd rather have a cup of tea.'

121

'I'll see what I can do.'

She had been put to bed in Louisa's room, a frothy confection of frills – and furbelows? thought Sarah. What the heck was a furbelow, anyway? She wouldn't know one if it walked up and kissed her. The afternoon sun filtered through the curtains and a stray beam lit up the dancing dust. Everything was still. In the distance, she could hear a lilting song, and the ever present susurration of the waves far below the window.

Suddenly she knew why she wanted to cry. The thought she had been pushing away came back with even more insistence. If the ghost Louisa was so proud of was only this poltergeist, then what of the white lady? Louisa must be some sort of medium if she were the reason for the poltergeist to have come; so why hadn't she seen the white lady? She'd lived in the castle for nearly three years, and she'd never even heard of the white lady?

Yet the Doctor's scope had shown quite clearly that this time was the only one since the sixteenth century that the castle had had a violent psychic disturbance.

It couldn't be! It mustn't be!

A gentle voice broke in upon the turmoil of her thoughts. 'I've brought you some tea. Cook was loath to unlock the caddy, but I made her.'

122

Sarah turned to her, the tears streaming down her face.

She couldn't speak.

'Why Sarah, dearest!' said Louisa, putting the tea down and taking Sarah's brown hand in her soft white fingers.

'Whatever is the matter?'

'Oh, Louisa,' Sarah managed to say, convulsively gripping her fingers,

‘be happy. Please be happy!’

A smile dimpled the childish face. ‘Why, as to that, I declare I cannot help it. I have done my utmost to feel as I should, but without success. I fear I must lack sensibility.

Why, in *Udolpho* St Aubert can scarce look at a sunset without weeping with a fine melancholy.’ She was laughing at herself ‘For my part, I find them rather jolly!’

Still crying, Sarah was laughing too. Her fears were nonsense. The lady in white must come from another era altogether. Surely nothing disastrous could happen to this lovely girl?

‘Why, to be sure, we have our share of such legends –

what old house does not? But I have never done them the honour of giving them any credence. Nor do I wish to extend their lives.’

The Doctor and Signor Verconti were dining alone in the large dining-room, waited upon by an army of servants.

Louisa had been given leave to share a tray with Sarah, and 123

the angelic Miss Grinley was away on her annual visit to her native Yorkshire.

‘I have made a particular study of such things,’ said the Doctor, tucking into a veal cutlet, one of the half-dozen dishes of meat on offer, ‘both from the viewpoint of an historian and as a student of natural philosophy.’

‘Come now, Doctor,’ said the comfortably plump Barone, helping himself to a thick slice of pork, ‘one can hardly find an equivalence between the watching of birds and the hunting of ghosts. Such things are surely the stuff of the romantic rubbish with which foolish women and children like to “freeze their young blood”. Allow me to cut you a slice of this excellent pork. Or a plump songthrush, perhaps?’

The Doctor declined with a smile but helped himself to another glass of wine. ‘A remarkable wine, Signore. Your own?’

‘The last of the ’09, alas.’

Having, with an appreciative sip, paid silent respect to the passing of a noble vintage, the Doctor resumed his gentle attack. ‘You saw for

yourself this very evening, sir, a phenomenon of nature which would be difficult to explain away as romantic rubbish.'

'You have me, Doctor. I have thought the tales the servants have brought to me to be just that – tales. The tittle-124

tattle of the servants' hall. Or at the most the pranks of some child. Though to be sure the most rigorous enquiry has not revealed a culprit. But after tonight…' He chewed solemnly on his pork.

The Doctor waited.

'Very well,' said the Barone, putting down his knife and fork. 'You carry the day. I strike my colours. A glass of wine with you, sir, to celebrate your victory.'

They replenished their glasses and solemnly toasted each other.

'It is said, then,' Verconti began, settling back into his chair, 'that many years ago, two hundred or maybe even three, my ancestor, the Barone of the time, having lost his heir in the wars, was plagued by the importunities of a false claimant to the inheritance, his wife being no longer able for child-bearing…'

'…but you see, Sarah dearest, he was not fit to be an heir, for he was a Mad Monk! And I think it probable that the true heir was not slain in battle at all, but murdered!

What say you, dear Sarah Jane, do you not think that must be true? Although, to be sure, Mrs Radcliffe… But I outrun my story!'

Sarah had found that the collation of cold meats and fruit brought to her bedside had more than restored her 125

spirits. Her headache – and the pain in her shoulder – had been reduced to a dull ache by the Doctor's draught; and nobody could remain sad for long in Louisa's company…

She laughed. 'A murderer as well as a Mad Monk! He really was the villain of the piece.'

'Well,' continued Louisa, 'the Monk was a sorcerer too, and was trying to raise the dead or Lucifer or the fiends of Hell or somebody like that. But his evil designs were foiled; for a good magician – I think it must have been Merlin, though that is not a part of the story – appeared at the stroke of midnight in a flash of heavenly fire and, to punish him

for his wickedness, walled him up alive! Now, is that not charmingly horrid?' And Louisa clapped her soft hands together in delight.

Charming indeed, thought Sarah. But what was more to the point – the whole story bore a strong resemblance to what the Doctor and she had seen for themselves. Except that the alchemist hadn't been walled up or any of that stuff.

She must tell the Doctor as soon as she could.

But when he came, in his capacity of medical adviser ('You'll stay in bed tomorrow morning, young lady, and no arguments!'), he wouldn't let her talk, but insisted on her settling down for an early night and gave her a swig of some other sort of potion or medication or whatnot which made her feel as high as a kite.

126

Why am I so knackered? she said to herself, as she nestled into the feather bed. After all, in the last forty-eight hours, I've only been turned into a sort of ghost, attacked by assorted fiends, nearly captured by an evil necromancer, travelled back to the Regency period (is it?), rescued from drowning (sort of) and clonked by a flipping great lump of rock. So why should I be tired? I'm losing my stamina; I'm not a teenager any more.

She was still giggling as the waves of sleep swept over her.

If Jeremy hadn't decided to go to the top of the gate-tower after breakfast the next morning, he might not have ended up tied to a chair in a cabin of the *Princess M.* under the threat of torture.

At least the Brigadier hadn't set him to watch for the return of the TARDIS, he thought, as he reached the top of the spiral staircase, puffing slightly. Though he seemed to take the news of the Doctor's hit-man a bit more seriously than Sarah, he hadn't been any more forthcoming about his plans to deal with Max Vilmio.

Well, that just suited Jeremy. If he was going to prove to the others that he wasn't some sort of Hooray Henry but a proper investigative journalist like Sarah, he'd got to have 127

some time to himself while he made up his mind what to do about it.

He settled himself into the corner of an embrasure on the south side and trained Mario's little brass telescope on the harbour. Yes, in spite

of a line of those tall thin poplar sort of trees – Cyprus trees, he'd heard Sarah call them; they must come from there – he could see most of the big yacht, still tied up to the harbour wall. Maybe, if he kept watching, he might see something which would give him a clue. Clues were the sort of thing people always went on about, weren't they?

The ferry had just arrived and there were a few trippers wandering aimlessly around. It was fun looking through a telescope, even one as small as this; like watching a silent film. You could see the people were saying things but…

wait a minute! That was the big chap wasn't it? The Yankee fellow who'd set the dogs on the Doc. It was, too; and he was talking to one of the tourists; a girl, a bit of a smasheroo by the look of it, as far as he could see under the big straw hat she was wearing. Still, judging by the mini-skirted legs and the barely concealed boobs (and Jeremy felt rather racy

– a favourite expression of his father's – just thinking the word), she was a bit of… Oh, fish-hooks! She'd left the quay and was lost to sight behind the trees.

128

When she eventually reappeared round the corner by the orange grove at the top of the hill Jeremy, under the dual influence of large quantities of bread and honey – the next best thing to marmalade – and the heat of the morning sun, was almost asleep. But the sight of her jiggling figure, each part of which seemed to have a life of its own, was better than an alarm clock. Disappointingly though, by the time she was really close, passing directly underneath him as she went through the gate-house and the telescope could really have come into its own, she was completely concealed by the brim of her hat.

To his utter surprise, shortly after she rang the bell and the door was opened, she disappeared inside.

She might be a clue! It was plainly his duty to find out.

And so it was that hurt pride, the essential truffle-pig propensities of the budding journalist, simple curiosity and common-or-garden lust all conspired together to propel Jeremy, with awful inevitability, towards his date with destiny.

It was the Brigadier who answered the door. Umberto had quite enough to do, he thought as he passed the snoring Mario (who had

added a hefty slug of grappa to his colazione). In any case, after what he'd heard from Jeremy 129

– why the Doctor? – there was no point in taking any chances.

'I have to refuse, I'm afraid, madam,' he said on being asked if she could have a look round the castle. 'The Barone has made an absolute rule that no tourists should be allowed inside.'

'I'm so so-o-o-rry,' she answered, fluttering her mascara at him and presenting her chest for his closer inspection. 'Of course I understand – and I think it's just dandy that you should follow your boss's wishes. There's nothing like an English butler, that's for sure.'

'Ah. Yes,' said the Brigadier, backing away from the advancing bosom. 'As a matter of fact, I'm not actually –'

'Aha! Alistair! What you think of? Ask the signorina in!'

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, wasn't that what the Americans said? His tail wasn't the only part of his physiology to be revitalized by his nap, thought the Brigadier, as he closed the door, watching the little old man escorting his visitor into the Great Hall with a courteous hand on her bottom.

'You Yankee Doodle, si?'

'Si. I mean, yeah. It's very kind of you, Signore.' She gave a little extra wiggle towards his hand.

130

'I'd be hopping cross with young Alistair if he close the door. Slam bang thank you mam! No good, huh?'

She gave him a surprised look. 'Well, that depends…'

she said.

And so a curious little procession made its way round the castle. Led by the sprightly Barone, who seized every chance of signifying his feelings towards his compliant guest, while pouring out an endless stream of well-nigh incomprehensible historical facts, it was completed firstly by the Brigadier, who felt he should keep an eye on his presumptuous relative, and at a greater distance – doing his best to keep out of sight – by the eager Jeremy.

It wasn't until the very end of the little guided tour that he actually got his clue. Miss Pulacki – for that's what she said her name was, Maggie Pulacki – refused with a giggle an invitation to see the painted ceiling in the Barone's bedroom, and made her way to the front door. Jeremy had seen this coming and hid round the first bend of the stairs.

But he could still hear every word she said.

'You've been really, really kind, Signore, and I mean that sincerely; telling me all about the ghosts and all.'

'Such a *bella ragazza* is honour to my house,' said Mario. 'You come and visit me again, si?'

131

'Yeah, sure. I'd like that. I could come tomorrow, if you like. It'd have to be tomorrow, because my holiday finishes on the twenty-second, you see. Or is the twenty-first a bad day for you? May the twenty-first?'

A frisson ran down Jeremy's back. The twenty-first again. He'd quite forgotten to mention that to Sarah – or to the Brigadier for that matter. And why should she want to come back?

This was it! She wasn't a tourist at all; she was something to do with the Vilmio chap. And if he could find out what May the twenty-first was all about…

'So long, Alistair. Have a nice day, now,' she was saying, having received an open invitation from the gleeful Mario.

The door was closed and the Brigadier and his uncle were coming up to the hall, arguing fiercely. Hiding in the corner until they'd gone by, Jeremy slipped downstairs, peeped out of the door, saw the flirt of a tight bottom in a mini-skirt vanishing through the gate-house and followed in a desperate tip-toe rush.

He managed to get the whole way down to the harbour without once being spotted by his quarry. But as she approached the big boat she glanced round and he was almost sure that she saw him behind her.

132

Luckily there was still quite a number of tourists hanging around –

what else was there to do after they'd had their fried fish or ice cream or whatever? – so he turned his back and pretended to be fascinated by the chappie ripping the guts out of the sardines; and then got really interested: he could have sworn that some of them were still alive. He nearly said something, but then remembered what he was supposed to be doing. But when he turned round again, she'd vanished! 'Oh Lor', he thought, now did she go on board the *Princess M.* or didn't she?

Sauntering with elaborate casualness over to the quayside, he tried to peer into the portholes. But in the glare of the afternoon sun they were all too dark. He took a furtive look round the boat. There seemed to be nobody about at all.

Keeping a tight lookout, he stepped onto the gangplank and walked with light steps over to the main entrance to the deckhouse. If Miss Perwhatski had come on board, this must have been the way she went, he thought, peeping cautiously into the gloom. Yes, surely that was her voice? It was difficult to hear properly with the sound of the engines.

He started to creep forward.

All at once, everything changed. An electric bell sounded right in his ear, making him jump and instigating 133

instant panic. Running footsteps and shouts from on deck.

He couldn't go back, he'd be caught.

Starting forward, he looked wildly round. The doors all seemed as if they must go into cabins or saloons or whatnot

– bar one, a little door near the stairs. He scuttled over and opened it. Yes, it was a sort of broom cupboard. He crammed himself into it, closed the door behind him, and waited in the utter darkness, listening with palpitating heart for the commotion to die down.

And that's how Jeremy was carried off to sea.

134

Eleven

When the Doctor came to see Sarah the next morning, she was a little taken aback to find that he knew all about the legend of the castello.

‘I’m still not convinced, though, that there isn’t something of great importance to be followed up here,’ he said. ‘With the strange happenings we witnessed all those years ago, it would be very surprising if a legend hadn’t grown up around them.’

At first Sarah was inclined to disagree with him. It was Louisa who convinced her that he was right. For the first of her secrets was revealed.

Louisa had insisted that she should stay where she was

– and that a truckle bed should be brought into the room so that they might be together. Sarah recognized it as the one her body was lying on when she’d gone on her jaunt into N-Space.

While Louisa was getting dressed in the morning, she had prattled on about her gowns, her caps, her ribbons, until Sarah was heartily glad to have been born in the twentieth century; and she’d vanished to have her breakfast with an assurance that she would be in an agony until she could rejoin her new friend.

After the Doctor had gone and Sarah’s breakfast tray had been cleared and they were alone together, she came over and sat on the edge of the bed, saying in a low thrilling voice, ‘I know more about the evil monk and his dread deeds than you might imagine. If it were not for the particular case, I should entreat you to read *Udolpho*, so that we might share in its melancholy grandeur, the sublime tale of the noble Valancourt and the base Montoni, but I shall not –’

For which Sarah was sublimely thankful. There was a pile of books on the side-table, with tides such as *The Skeleton of the Black Forest, The Witches of Midnight, Murder in the Mad- House* and so on, prominent amongst which were the four volumes of Mrs Radcliffe’s most famous novel. When she’d been left alone, she’d picked up the first volume and tried to read it, but the excesses of the story and the language, and the endless descriptions of romantic scenery, gave her such mental indigestion that she had to recite a whole wodge of John Betjeman to clear her head – like having a lemon sorbet to clean the palate after a heavily greasy meal.

‘– because it is of the utmost importance,’ Louisa continued, ‘that you should peruse Mrs Radcliffe’s latest work.’ She got up from the bed and went to a small cupboard across the room.

Oh no! And here she was, trapped in bed until lunchtime at the very least. There was no escape.

It was a very curious feeling, Sarah found, a little like finding an old newspaper in the attic, only backwards, to hold in her hands once more the very same volume, *The Mystery of the Castello*, which Jeremy had found in the library. Only now, instead of being an old book, yellowing and brittle, with a worn-out cover, it was brand-new.

The scarcely concealed glee with which Louisa handed it to her, and the way she lay on her little cot pretending to read herself, but continually peeping with her bright little eyes to see how Sarah was getting on, forced her to read it properly – though with a little judicious skipping. But almost immediately it seized her attention. For here was the very story she had heard from Louisa the night before, but fleshed out with all the romantic fervour of *Udolpho*.

In the event, she didn't have to read it all, for as she neared the end of volume one Louisa could contain herself no longer.

'Do you not see?' she said eagerly. 'It is all true! How Mrs Radcliffe knows it all, I cannot divine, unless she found some ancient text. I have writ to her, but she has not replied

– though to be sure she must be an old woman by now. But mark this! In the third volume – for there are but three –

when the foul monk is walled up, an iron-bound chest full 137

of gold coin is placed there with him. And – oh, Sarah! – it must be there to this very day!'

The second of her secrets, which she produced with an air of suppressed excitement, was a sheet of paper. Only it wasn't. With another buzz of *déja vu*, Sarah recognized it as the same piece of vellum the Doctor was carrying in his pocket, except that this was nearly twice the size.

'It was concealed in an old volume in the library,' said Louisa. 'I am of opinion that it must be of importance in the tale of the Mad Monk. To be sure, such a parchment is mentioned in the book. But I know no Latin apart from *mensa* and there's not a table to be seen.'

Sarah took it and read it as best she could. It included the fragment

which she had already seen, but had as well a lot of gibberish words which seemed to be part of a magic spell; and also listed the ingredients for a recipe of some sort, most of which she didn't recognize – until, with a thrill rather like the one she'd known when she saw with her own eyes the signature of the minister in the corruption scandal she'd uncovered the year before, she saw the word for quicksilver.

'No,' she said, 'I'm afraid it's not. It's just a bit of an old cookery book.'

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Now, why was she telling such a fib? The disappointment in Louisa's face nearly made her tell the truth. But what was the truth?

It's just conceivable that Jeremy might have got away with it. Certainly nobody came to the cupboard to get a broom or anything. But unfortunately, like most cupboards, it had no handle on the inside. He had effectively locked himself in.

He didn't realize at first what he had done. But by the time the shouting died down, and the thump of feet had stopped, he had got over his panic; and though it was clear from the slightly queasy roll of the deck that they had left the harbour, he took a deep breath and decided to get on with the task he had set himself. Swallowing down his increasing nausea, and trying to feel sort of James Bondish (they didn't treat him like a wally, did they?), he pushed at the door; and again; and again; and gave way to sheer funk.

'Help!'

He hammered on the door. He knew quite well that the air was already giving out. He could tell by the way he was panting.

'I'm locked in the cupboard! Help!'

There was that film with them trapped in a submarine; and their legs sort of went all limp and they sank to the floor 139

struggling for oxygen; and then died. He could feel his knees giving way already!

'H-e-e-elp!'

The burly seaman who hauled him out didn't speak –

though Jeremy was babbling his thanks. The thought flashed through his mind that if he'd been a cat he'd be down to about six lives by now (he must have lost at least a couple on Parakon).

He was frog-marched down the main corridor of the deck-house, all his protestations being quite ignored, into the enormous saloon at the end, and thrown to the floor in an untidy heap at the feet of the giant Max Vilmio, who seemed from such a low viewpoint to be at least eight feet tall.

A female voice said, 'He was at the casde. He was following us around when the old jerk was giving with the guided tour bit.' He hadn't noticed her standing in the background.

'Get up,' commanded Vilmio. He struggled to his feet.

'What are you doing here, kid?'

Jeremy fought to keep his voice steady. 'Oh, I just thought your boat looked a super sort of boat and I've always loved boats so I thought I'd have a sort of a look round and I went into the cupboard to sort of look round and 140

the door slammed on me and I – I think I'm going to throw up!

'Ouch!' he continued, as Vilmio took his nose between the joints of the first two fingers of his left hand and twisted.

'Answer my question. What are you after?'

Jeremy's answer was quite unintelligible. The girl gave a little grunt of protest. Max, with a surprised glance at her, gave his nose an extra tweak and let go.

Jeremy put up a gentle hand to explore the extent of the damage. 'That hurt!' he said indignantly.

Vilmio said, 'Put him in the cable locker. And make sure he can't do any more yelling. I'll deal with the little pipsqueak later.'

As the protesting Jeremy was dragged off to his place of durance vile, he was puzzling over a curious fact: as he was dragged through the door, he could have sworn he saw the girl look at him with a silent message of sympathy in her eyes.

Maggie followed the broad back down the gangway at San Stefano

Maggiore with a turmoil of emotions churning around inside. She couldn't remember feeling like this since her father died.

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Yeah, okay, so she preferred a man to be a man. She'd even admit that she found snuffing a creep who deserved it, like, a turn-on. But hurting a kid…

They said her mother died of a heart attack, ignoring the bruise on her cheek and the blood running down her face from the split lip, but Maggie knew that she'd at last given up the struggle, the struggle to keep the six children together, to feed and clothe them, to shield them from the worst brutalities of the drunken bum who was their father.

Then, after her pitifully skinny body had been carried from the too-small tenement apartment and they'd been to the gabbled funeral at Our Lady of Dolours and seen her dropped into the cold clay, he'd expected life to go on just as before, with Maggie taking her place; expecting her to take her place in every sense, it seemed, until a well-placed knee confounded his expectations and earned her a beating the like of which she'd never known. When she went to the store the next morning, her neighbours turned their faces away. That's how bad it was.

He left her alone after that, but continued to beat up on the kids at the slightest excuse – or none at all if he was drunk enough; and she'd learnt what her mother had suffered, not being able to protect them; hearing them sobbing themselves into a tormented sleep and knowing she was powerless to stop him.

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Maggie Pulacki followed Max Vilmio into the cool of the high-ceilinged drawing room. Standing quite still with his eyes closed, as if he'd been waiting all day, was Nico, his face a mask of pain.

Max turned to her. 'Get lost,' he said; and as she dosed the door behind her, she heard him say, 'Well? Is it done?'

She leant against the door post, remembering the last day, one of those unbearably hot New York days when the people walk through the haze with a redness in their eyes and a rage in their bellies, when he'd downed a full bottle of rot-gut whisky on top of his usual, and he was threatening little Tommy – eight years old, for Christ's sake – with the carving knife… Would he have used it? And if she hadn't pushed

him away from the kid would he still have fallen out of the window?

When the Doctor saw the old manuscript it seemed to sway him towards the idea that the real information they were seeking – how the crack in the barrier was first started

– did indeed lie in the earlier period.

'This is almost certainly the document the alchemist was using to make his unsuccessful elixir,' he said. 'I'm not quite sure what the spell refers to, but it might turn out that we could use it ourselves.'

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'Oh, come on, Doctor! Magic spells? That's not the way the world wags, now is it?'

'Not the way your world wags – or mine for that matter.

We both deal in facts, as far as we can. But you of all people should know that a fact seldom crops up without a whole string of associated beliefs. That's the world you journalists inhabit – a world of value judgements.

Everything is strained through a particular belief filter, You call it finding an angle. Right?'

'So?'

'Belief is more powerful than you might think. If something has been believed by a number of people for a long time, it has a subjective reality; and that can have real empirical effects.' He held up the parchment. 'Especially when you're dealing with N-Space.'

Sarah shook her head. 'I find that difficult to believe.'

She looked up. He was grinning at her.

'Oh you!' she said.

The conversation with the Doctor took place during one of the odd absences of Louisa, who, while vowing eternal love and friendship to her new chum Sarah, would every now and again slip away for half an hour or so, returning flushed and a mite tousled, talking nonsense at a rate of knots, as Sarah put it to herself.

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This obviously concerned another of her ‘secrets’ and it wasn’t very difficult to guess what kind of secret it was, especially when the third time she was gone Sarah, who had been given permission to get dressed, caught a glimpse of her spotted white gown behind a hedge Just before a young man carrying a long-handled spade emerged and looked both ways before going towards the kitchen garden.

‘Who is he?’ she asked casually, when Louisa once more returned, burbling about the beauty of the sunlight on the sea and the sails of the fishing-boats looking like seabirds’ wings and –

She stopped, wide-eyed. ‘How did you know?’ she gasped. ‘Oh please, please, dearest Sarah Jane, do not tell!

Powly would send me to a convent, I know he would, and I would end my days a cloistered sister, a dried-up old maid, an ancient nun with nothing but my memories – and whiskers – and warts. The very thought throws me into an agony! I implore you to keep my secret clasped to your heart!’

Sarah, who had been trying to get a word in, assured her that her secret was safe. ‘Who is he?’ she said again. ‘The gardener’s boy?’

Louisa looked at her as if she were a witch.

‘Why yes,’ she said. ‘Or so he is taken to be by all who know him. But, to say the truth, I am persuaded that he is in fact –’ she lowered her voice ‘– Powly’s long lost heir!’

Sarah did her best to keep a straight face. ‘Does the Barone know he’s lost his heir?’

‘I know not. But he is not married; he has no son; there is no nephew, married niece or cousin to carry on the line.

The chief of all this must be that he needs an heir. He is an old man of forty! And Giuseppe tells me that his family is come down in station – and one has only to perceive that noble brow, that true patrician nose, that –’

‘Yes,’ said Sarah. ‘I expect he’s very pretty.’

For a moment, she thought that the sunny Louisa was going to be angry. But then she laughed. ‘To be sure,’ she said, ‘I am no unbiased

witness.'

She ran to the door. 'Come,' she said. 'I will show you the last of my secrets.'

It was with a hopeful heart that Sarah realized that she was being led to the courtyard near the cliff-top. Perhaps Louisa had been disingenuous in denying any knowledge of the white lady. Perhaps this was the very secret she had been keeping to herself.

But when they went through the archway which led from the garden to the cloistered court, Louisa took her to the store-room built into the castle wall (which Sarah knew 146

before as the alchemist's workshop). 'There!' she said, pointing dramatically to a perfectly plain bit of stone work above the sacks of vegetables. 'Behind that wall we shall discover the secrets of the ages. That is where they lie, the mouldering bones of the evil monk, along with the treasure of the castello!'

We? Who was going to do this discovering, then? Sarah thought she'd better find out.

'Why Giuseppe and myself, of course. As the clock strikes twelve, just as it happened in the book. And Powly will be so pleased to have the treasure, he'll consent to our betrothal, and recognize him as his heir and – oh, Sarah!

Life is just like the books, is it not? No, no, it is better, far better!'

She could contain herself no longer. With a little hop and a skip, she whirled around and danced up the steps onto the high wall, jumped up into one of the crenellations of the battlements and stood on the very edge, overlooking the sea, her spotted white muslin whipping back and forth in the merciless wind.

'Louisa! Come back, it's dangerous!' called Sarah, running after her.

But Louisa was oblivious to everything but the rapture of her fantasy. Lifting her arms to the sky, she called on the Spirit of Nature to witness to herjoy.

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But Sarah could not share her exaltation. With sinking heart, she faced the truth. She could pretend no longer: the white lady was indeed

Louisa herself.

148

Twelve

The Brigadier's sense of disquiet about Vilmio's intentions soon resolved itself into a professional resolve to increase the security of the castle. After all, he thought, if the boy was right in what he heard, then it was by no means beyond the bounds of possibility that Vilmio might try to eliminate the rest of his opposition – namely the Brigadier himself –

by the use of violence, which would leave Uncle Mario at his mercy.

Unfortunately, travelling as a private citizen rather than on duty, he had had perforce to leave his own gun behind.

But then, the first priority wasn't so much a matter of weaponry as of personnel. Apart from himself, the total garrison of his fortress was comprised of two old men and a boy.

'No, no, no, no, no,' said Mario, when asked to accompany him down to the village to recruit some reinforcements. 'My people, when the little fiends come out to play, they run away like Georgie the Porgie. Good-night, sweethearts. Good ridding.'

'Well, I'm sorry, Uncle,' replied the Brigadier, 'but I'm not prepared to take the responsibility of keeping you safe unless we get some help. This man may turn up on the doorstep with a gun.'

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'I got gun,' replied the old man. 'I show you.' And off he went in his shuffling, skipping run to the steep stairs leading up to the gallery in the great hall. His impetuous rush became more of a hoist and a heave as he pulled himself to the top and disappeared from view, but he was back in no time, flourishing a strange-looking object above his head.

'Ecco!' he said. 'Behold!'

'Good grief, it's a blunderbuss,' said the Brigadier.

'Is right. Belonged to my grandpa's grandpa. Is good gun, I tell you straight.'

To demonstrate this proposition, he put the gun to his shoulder and

pulled the trigger.

Luckily he was pointing it at nothing more important than an Aubusson tapestry hanging on the adjacent wall, for there was a mighty bang, the charge of pebbles, metal nuts and bolts, olive stones and rusty nails flew through the air and the priceless cloth was rent by a multitude of jagged holes.

The Brigadier took a deep breath. If Mario had aimed it at him, Vilmio's problems would have been over.

Mario himself was also somewhat shaken. The gun had apparently been loaded since the second world war, when it was kept in readiness to deal with any German invasion, Mario having been indomitably anti-fascist from 1922 on.

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In his subdued state, he was the more easily persuaded, and soon, wearing his wide-brimmed peasant straw, his scraggy, blue-veined legs sticking out of knee-length shorts and ending in rope sandals, he set off with the immaculately blazered and panamaed Brigadier to raise his private army.

It was when Sarah came to the Doctor to tell him of her dreadful news that he again nearly lost his life.

He and the Barone had found that they had a friend in common. As a young man sent to Naples to learn the ways of the world, Paolo Verconti had so enthusiastically complied that he had had a passionate affair with the wife of the British envoy, one William Hamilton, a fact which had in no way prevented him from becoming the intimate companion of his successor in the role of lover of the ravishing Emma; and it was the Doctor who, when visiting the rector of Burnham Thorpe, had taught his infant son Horatio to box the compass, some years before he entered the navy as a young gentleman of twelve.

So naturally, the Barone and the Doctor warmed to each other; and the Doctor was given *carte blanche* to pursue his investigations into the natural history of ghosts.

He had been using the probe to quantify the traces of N-Power remaining in the gap from which had fallen the stone which nearly killed him. He was about to return from 151

the gallery to the great hall below when Sarah ran in, calling for him.

'I'm up here,' he called back and started to descend the precipitous stone staircase.

This was why Sarah not only saw him fall headlong down the twenty-foot drop but saw quite clearly that he was pushed.

The fact that Sarah had once before seen the Doctor fall

– and a lot further than twenty feet – made no difference.

Time seemed to speed up and slow down at the same time.

In the instant of his fall she saw him spreadeagled at the bottom of the stairs, neck broken, limbs grotesquely awry; but the slow motion fact of it was that as he took off from the top step he curled into a forward somersault; it took him gracefully halfway down, to touch with the toe of one shoe; and so to repeat the pattern, landing in a run.

Lightly coming to a standstill by Sarah's side, he immediately swung round to look up at the gallery. 'I was pushed,' he said.

'You were! You were!' she cried, starting forward. He put up a hand to stop her.

'Don't waste your time,' he said. 'He's well away by now. We haven't a hope of finding out who it was.'

'I know who it was,' she said passionately. 'It was the person Jeremy said that Max Vilmio had sent to kill you.

But how could he be here? How could he have –'

But the Doctor was looking at her as if – and she couldn't resist thinking it when she was remembering later –

as if he had seen a ghost. 'What did you say his name was?'

he said.

'What? Vilmio, do you mean?'

'Did you call him *Max* Vilmio?'

‘Yes. That’s his name, apparently. Max.’

‘Of course. How stupid of me.’

The Doctor turned his back on her and walked straight up to the bottom of the stairs, where he seemed to be examining closely the carving of an unprepossessing bullock which was part of the decoration of the side wall which formed the banister.

Sarah walked over to him. ‘Doctor? What is it?’

He looked up and through her. It was nearly half a minute before his eyes came into focus. ‘Yes, it all fits,’ he said.

‘Doctor, please! What did I say?’

At last he looked her in the eye again. ‘Don’t you remember? When we were in the sixteenth century. What did the lady of the house say was the name of the sorcerer, as she called him?’

It seemed so long ago. She struggled to remember. ‘I don’t think she said – no, wait a minute! She said something about him having the same name as the Emperor, didn’t she?’

‘Indeed she did. A German name, she said. Well, do you know who was the only Emperor about at that time?

Maximilian the First of the Holy Roman Empire. That’s who. The alchemist’s name was Maximilian – Max!’

Now it was Sarah’s turn to go into a brown study. What was it the Doctor said the alchemist had been after? No, it was the man himself, when he made the potion that killed that poor man. He called it the *elixir vitae* – the elixir of life.

So he was searching for earthly immortality; and who was to say that he didn’t find it later and survive until the twentieth century? And what’s more…!

She looked up at the Doctor. ‘That’s why he sent the man to knock you off. When he saw you with the Brigadier, he recognized you from the time he saw you in the sixteenth century. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘And I’ll tell you another thing! The man who pushed you. It must have been that man he killed, the ghost he enslaved. The man I saw was wearing a monk’s robe just like him; and how could he have followed us here if he wasn’t a ghost or something?’

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That seemed to settle it in the Doctor’s mind. ‘Come along,’ he said; and marched briskly towards the front door.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Where we should have gone in the first place: the sixteenth century. We have to find out exactly what is going on.’

Sarah pelted after him and managed to catch him just before he went out of the door. ‘Please wait,’ she said, ‘I’ve got something to tell you, something quite appalling.’

He stopped; and she told him what she’d heard and seen and what it meant: Louisa was the white lady.

‘Is that all?’ he said. ‘I came to that conclusion some time ago. Now, do hurry up. We can talk in the TARDIS.’

He set off again with even more purpose.

Sarah caught him up as he set off across the bailey, half following alongside him, half dodging in front. Why couldn’t he stop and listen?

‘But don’t you see?’ she said. ‘We can’t leave now.

Louisa’s going to die!’

He stopped short and turned to her. He was very serious.

‘Of course she is,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you?’

Mario could hardly be accounted a success as a recruiting officer. After going round most of the houses in 155

the village like an odd pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses, they had had no success at all in persuading anybody to come up to the castello; all were either too frightened of the reported fiends or too offended by the Barone’s castigation of them as *traditori*, which the Brigadier gathered meant ‘traitors’.

As they approached the last house but two, they heard the sounds of domestic strife: a duet of bass rumble and shrieking soprano with a percussive accompaniment of thumps and tinkling crashes, as of thrown pots. The front door burst open and a large fat man came out like the human projectile from the mouth of a circus cannon. Uncle Mario seized his opportunity; the man, one Sergio, seized his, readily agreeing to escape for a while, pausing only to hurl a few more verbal missiles through the open door, which was soon slammed in his face.

The next house producing no reply whatsoever, it looked as if Sergio was to be their entire force. However, at the last house of all, a young man with dark hair, greased into an Elvis quiff, appeared.

'Why, you sure came to the right little ol' venue, man,'

he said, as soon as he realized that the Brigadier was English. He dived back inside, a murmur of voices was heard, all of which was unintelligible bar the words ' *grazie a Dio!* ', and he reappeared, clutching a battered old acoustic guitar.

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The castello defence force thus constituted, it made its way slowly back up the hill, stopping every few steps for Mario to rest his legs, which were starting to wobble; Sergio to get his breath and complain once more that his wife refused to cook for him; and Roberto – for that was his name – to sing another chorus of 'Blue Suede Shoes'.

The Brigadier plodded on with a grim face. Compared with this lot, Jeremy was starting to look amazingly competent.

Where had Jeremy got to, anyway? He hadn't seen him since breakfast.

Jeremy was in fact sitting in the stinking darkness of the compartment in the bows of the *Princess M.* where the anchor cable was housed, wish his hands tied behind his back and a large piece of adhesive wrapping tape stuck over his mouth. His bottom was wet, his nose was sore and he'd got pains in his back, in his belly, in his… Oh, all over!

This was what came of playing the hero, he thought bitterly. All this action man stuff – huh! He was about as much use as one of those plastic dolls. He hadn't found out a thing, and it was quite obvious that the Vilmio chap wasn't just going to leave him to rot. Oh no. Their next encounter was likely to be even more unpleasant than the

first.

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He tried to rally his always small supply of courage.

Name, rank and number, that's all they ever gave away in the war films. No matter what they did to him (and his mind turned away with a shudder from the thought), he wouldn't tell them anything about the castle, or the Brig, or the Doctor or May the twenty-first or anything.

Not that he knew anything about May the twenty-first, apart from the fact that it was tomorrow; so that was all right.

There was a clank as the cable-locker door swung open.

He blinked in the sudden harsh glare.

'Out!'

It was clear that if he didn't obey, he would be dragged out, as he had been dragged from the broom cupboard. He crawled out as best he could and scrambled to his feet.

'Name, rank and number,' he said to himself as he was hustled across the deck. 'Name, rank and number.'

'We'll drop in on Lethbridge-Stewart on the way,' said the Doctor. 'He needs to know what he's up against.'

How could the twentieth century be on the way from the nineteenth to the sixteenth? thought Sarah. Then again, why not?

'It's quite clear that the poltergeist incident was deliberate too,' went on the Doctor, who had been busy ever 158

since they got into the TARDIS, taking the guts out of a sort of gun thing which seemed vaguely familiar to Sarah.

'Do you mean that the monk chap was responsible for all those stones?'

'No, no. Ordinary ghosts don't have any preternatural powers, beyond their ability to be permeable or solid at will.

Why should they have? No, he used the poltergeist shower of apports

to disguise the fact that he pushed that stone from the gallery.'

Sarah watched as he dug in his toolbox for an odd-shaped piece of whatever with wires sticking out of it.

'The poltergeist is quite a different thing,' he said. 'It's really a low grade N-Form. As I told you, the N-Forms desperately crave personality, so if one can manage to get through into our world, which thank heavens isn't very common, it looks for somebody with similar tendencies to its particular complex of negative emotion and tries to set up a merger, so to speak.'

'Possession,' breathed Sarah.

'A misnomer. I said a merger, not a takeover. Anybody can resist the influence – and a strong negative personality is made all the stronger, in control of the powers of the N-Form, which can be quite considerable. After all, when you think what a simple poltergeist can do when merged with a naughty child on the verge of adulthood…' His voice 159

drifted away as he compressed a tiny spring and inserted it into the gun – if it was a gun.

Sarah's jaw had dropped. 'You mean, Louisa was possessed by a fiend?'

'Why will you use such emotive words?' said the Doctor.

'I'll tell you anything, only please don't hit me again!'

said Jeremy, doing his best not to cry.

Maggie was very near to tears herself. It wasn't the first time by any means that she'd seen someone put to the question. Face it, it usually gave her a buzz. Bruised, cut cheeks and split lips could be quite a turn-on. But Jeez! this was only a kid!

She had made herself stay in the saloon and watch as Jeremy, tied to one of the Art-Deco chairs (which the interior decorator had costed at two thousand dollars apiece), was put under interrogation. Max, for some reason, had been clearly seething with barely controlled rage ever since he'd spoken to Nico; it would have been safer to keep well away, but somehow she couldn't.

'I'll ask you once more, you little bastard,' said Max, quietly, hardly

moving his mouth. ‘Who is this Doctor and where does he come from?’

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He’d been very brave to start with, refusing to say anything at all after he’d told them what his name was. But after some ten minutes of the treatment…

‘I tell you I’ve no idea,’ said Jeremy with difficulty.

‘He’s just a sort of scientist chap, that’s all.’

‘I know that’s not all he is, and so do you,’ said Max.

‘He knows about the twenty-first, and the flight of the dragon, doesn’t he?’

Dragon? thought Maggie. What now? More Mafia stuff? Some sort of password?

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ moaned Jeremy.

Max slowly lifted his left hand, his good hand. Then, with the slashing speed of a jungle cat he delivered a backhander that lifted Jeremy several inches into the air and sent him crashing to the floor. He would answer no more questions for quite a while.

‘We sail back in the morning,’ said Max to the burly seaman by the door. ‘Enough’s enough. I have to take the castle by tomorrow midnight.’

‘Si, signore,’ said the man, ‘and what about this one?’

Maggie held her breath.

Max looked down at Jeremy, as he lay unconscious amid the broken pieces of two grand’s worth of polished wood.

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‘Wait until we’re half way across – and dump him,’ he said.

162

Thirteen

The fiend that was waiting for the Brigadier was quite different from the ones that he'd seen before.

The rest of his new army were still lagging behind, so that when he walked up from the entrance lobby and saw the entity standing at the other end of the great hall, swine-faced, drool-lipped and globular, some twelve feet tall and nearly matching in diameter, he thought for one moment he might be able to prevent them from seeing it.

'Keep back! All of you!' he snapped. But he was too late.

Mario was the first through the door. He gave the monster a cursory glance and made his way unsteadily to his chair by the fire. He was followed closely by Roberto, whose rendition of 'I Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog'

drifted to a faltering close as he saw the creature, which was swaying like a gargantuan pink blancmange and grunting quietly to itself.

By this time, Sergio had appeared in the doorway. His little eyes pushed aside the soft ridges of fat which hindered their view and popped wide open. Unlike Roberto – and indeed, the Brigadier, who quickly joined him in the corner behind the chimney breast – he made no attempt to hide. On 163

the contrary, he moved slowly forward, his eyes still staring, as if in a hypnotic trance.

The creature, looking like the reflection in a fairground mirror of the man opposite, was blobbling towards him, its rolls of sogginess dragging along the floor. They met; and for a moment Sergio disappeared into the clammy folds of not-flesh.

But as the Brigadier watched in horrid fascination, the huge mound began to shrink. Its skin wrinkled like the surface of a cold rice pudding and it seemed to be sucked into the now revealed Sergio. Then it was gone.

Sergio turned, his face full with satiation – and yet with the clear anticipation of gluttony yet unsatisfied. 'She'll cook for me now,' he said, and walked with a firm waddle out of the door and away down the hill.

'I was afraid I might find something of the sort.'

It was the Doctor's voice coming from the far door.

The Brigadier moved into view, leaving Roberto leaning against the chimney breast, wide-eyed and panting slightly, murmuring to himself, ‘Too much, man. Like, too much!’

‘Good afternoon, Doctor, Sarah,’ said the Brigadier. ‘As you saw for yourself, we’ve just had a visitor.’

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A snore came from the big chair, where Uncle Mario had fallen into the happily uncaring sleep of the very old (or the very young).

‘As I predicted, Lethbridge-Stewart, the cracks are extending. The catastrophe could happen at any time.’

‘I’m certainly glad to see you. We seem to be under threat from the front and the rear. Our friend Max Vilmio –’

‘I’m sorry. We’re not stopping. I came to warn you that you are under an even greater threat than you may think.

Now please listen carefully.’

As he finished his tale, the Doctor delved into his capacious side pocket and produced the gun that he had been working on in the TARDIS. ‘Do you recognize this?’

‘Certainly. It’s one of the small stun guns from Parakon.’

Of course! thought Sarah.

‘A very useful weapon,’ went on the Brigadier. ‘Just what we need.’

‘I nicked it when Onya wasn’t looking,’ said the Doctor, handing it over. ‘I’ve modified it so that it is effective to an extent against N-Forms as well as living beings. It’ll only hold a fiend up briefly, but it will literally blow a ghost away.’

How could you kill a ghost? thought Sarah.

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‘How can you kill a ghost, for Pete’s sake?’ said the Brigadier.

‘I said “literally”,’ he said severely. ‘And you’ll need it, believe me. This creature of Vilmio’s could come through a wall and then open the door to him. Good luck!’

He turned and walked away. Sarah looked at the Brigadier and shrugged.

‘May I say how fetching you look, Miss Smith,’ he said.

‘Thank you,’ she answered. ‘The Dolly Dimple look was all the rage where we’ve just come from. I shudder to think what I’ll look like where we’re going.’

‘Sarah!’

‘Coming, Doctor,’ she called sweetly; and went.

It was designed to be a torture chamber, there was no question about it. Looming out of the darkness, there were all the old-fashioned instruments of torture – the rack, the iron maiden, the manacles to suspend you from the wall and so on – that Jeremy had seen so often in films and cartoons.

He could only suppose that the more sophisticated equipment (for electric shocks and stuff) would be wheeled in later.

Someone was coming!

Jeremy dived into the corner behind the rack and crouched down, eyes screwed tight shut, arms over his head, 166

making himself as small and inconspicuous as possible. But then, the impossible: a hand had reached out from nowhere and was shaking his shoulder. He let out an inarticulate noise, a sort of woofing grunt.

'Jeremy! Be quiet! It's me, Maggie!'

He opened his eyes - and woke up. He was in the chain lockeragain. How had he got there? His last memory was ...

But his mind turned resolutely away from the pain of remembering.

Maggie was untying his hands and hissing at him to keep silent. He sat up and started to peel off the tape gag, but the pain of his split lip was unendurable.

'There's only one way, sugar,' whispered Maggie. 'Hold onto your socks!' She took hold of the loose corner and with one quick tug, yanked the whole thing off. Jeremy thought he was going to scream, but mnaged to confine himself to a strangulated gasp.

Out on the deck, he took deep breaths of the cool night air, thankful to be rid of the foetid stench of rotten seaweed that filled the chain locker. He could see by the light of the myriad stars and the crescent of the moon that the yacht was now in the middle of the harbour moored to a buoyor anchored or something.

Where was Maggie going? Flattening herself against the side of the deck-house, she was edging down the side deck 167

towards the staircase thingy which led down to the water.

He followed suit.

'Sssh!'

She stopped by a door, lifting a warning hand; the quiet sound of voices coming from aft and getting nearer. Maggie dived across the deck and under the lifeboat hanging from its davits just opposite. She beckoned frantically to him. He glanced towards the rear of the yacht. Yes, he could hear them coming. Taking a deep breath, he shot after her.

Maggie clutched at him and held him still. He could still feel his bare arm pressed into her softness. It almost made it worthwhile being so scared.

The voices were quite close now. Two sets of legs appeared and sropped by the door opposite. The murmuring continued. But at last -

' *Buona notte*.'

' *Ciao*.'

One of the pairs of legs turned and vanished through the door, the other continued towards the bow. Moments later, they heard the footsteps going down the forward hatchway.

At the bottom of the stairs there was a smallish motor boat tied up. Maggie motioned to him to get in, untied the rope and climbed in herself. She gave a push, and, as the boat drifted away across the flt calm water (Jeremy couldn't help noticing that you could see as many stars in the water 168

as you could in the sky), she ferreted under the front deck and pulled out apaddle - no two. Like sort of Indian canoe paddle, thought Jeremy, taking one.

He soon got the idea. Sitting one on each side, they gently paddled the boat towards the harbour enterance and out into the gentle swell of the open sea.

Now what? They could hardly paddle all the way to the other island. But that wasn't Maggie's idea at all. Putting her paddle on the bottom of the boat, she put her hand into her pocket and produced a bunch of keys. 'Here,' she said, holding them out to him.

'I don't know how to work it,' he said, in a panic.

'Well, I sure as hell don't,' said Maggie. 'It's just like driving an automobile, isn't it?'

'Can you drive?'

'No. Can't you.'

'I had one lesson, but I drove the car into a ditch and they said I was a menace and wouldn't let me go on.'

Stalemate.

After finding a torch in a toolbox, they managed to work out how to get the engine started. Jeremy sat in the driver's seat and experimented with the controls - and yes, there was just frwards and backwards and stop - though when you put the thingy in stop, the boat didn't; it went on a bit. He drove it in a circle, feeling that James Bond would 169

have been proud of him. It was as easy as driving a dodgem; easier, because you didn't have yobbos full of lager bashing into you.

'Right,' he said authoritatively. 'Off we go.'

But which way?

Jeremy tried to remember the map on the ferry. Sarah had pointed out the islands to him but he'd been feeling too green to take much notice. They were sort of next to each other, he remembered; and hadn't she said something about

'west'?

'Is it east on the left and west on the right, or what?'

'Are you asking me?' said Maggie irritably.

He peered at the compass. Yes, west was over there and it was pointing right at the harbour entrance, and east ...

'Hey.look!' he said in triumph.

'What?'

'Where east is pointing. Over there. Sort of light shining over the - er - the horizon.' He brought out the nautical-sounding word with pride. 'It must be the light of San Stefano Minore.'

Maggie peered in the direction he was looking.

'So what are we waiting for, honey?' she said.

How could she have been so flip with the Brig? thought Sarah, as she peeled off the dress she'd borrowed from 170

Louisa. After all, things hadn't changed. Louisa was stili going to die.

Or rather - Louisa was dead.

She stopped looking for the right clothes to transform herself into a Renaissance page, and sat back on her heel while she considered the matter.

Although she still felt quite devastated that the innocent Louisa, so bubbling with life, should meet with such an unhappy end, the fact remained that when she was talking to the Brig, it had all happened over a hundred and fifty years before. As the Doctor had implied, everybody had to die sooner or later.

For that matter, when they got to where they were going now, Louisa wouldn't be due to be born for something like three hundred years; and that felt different too.

It was like relativity, she thought, as she resumed her search. It all depended where you were standing at the time.

She picked out a pair of dun-coloured tights - complete with padded codpiece; honestly, men! Still it solved one problem - and cast around (or a short doublet of a design which would flatten her where she needed to be flattered.

The Doctor had suggested that she would be better off as a boy on three grounds. One, males had much more freedom of action than females; two, she would be safer; and three, it suited better with his

scholar and philosopher (with perhaps a touch of implied magician) who would never travel without a servant.

The Doctor had dug out some pictures for her to follow.

One drawing in particular caught her eye, perhaps not surprisingly, for with a shock of recognition she realized it was signed 'Rafaello'.

Luckily, with a bit of pruning (the hated curls were soon lopped off), her normal hairstyle was exactly right for a young man or boy at the turn of the century.

Sitting down to tie up the tapes of her doublet - there didn't seem to be any with buttons - and finding it a bit difficult with her sore shoulder, she suddenly realized how knackered she was. She lay back on the pile of clothes for a moment to consider her get-up. It seemed about right. The terracotta of the doublet was okay, wasn't it? Too bright a colour wouldn't help the masculinity bit, but she didn't want to look yukky.

Catching herself, she grinned ruefully at her own vanity; and fell abruptly asleep.

'Any chance of any breakfast? Scrambled eggs on toast would be ace.'

The Doctor swung round from the mirror where he was putting the finishing touches to his disguise.

'Well, well, well,' he said with a smile. 'Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea after all.'

She knew quite well that having added a little pill-box hat on the back of her head, clumpy square-toed shoes and a wickedly sharp dagger in her girdle, she made very handsome boy indeed.

'I can look after myself,' she said in a manly voice, putting her hand on the hilt of the dagger; and then she ruined the whole effect by beginning to giggle uncontrollably. The Doctor frowned. 'What?' he said. 'What is it?'

She managed to abate her laughter a little. 'Honestly, Doctor, you look like Santa Claus.'

He did too. Although he was dressed in a long black robe, his surcoat was a rich red; he'd combed his hair down past his ears and attached a massive white beard to his chin.

'Nonsense,' he said. 'I've modelled myself on the famous self-portrait of my old friend Leonardo, who was an exact contemporary. So it's absolutely accurate.'

'Then your old friend Leonardo looked like Santa Claus too,' she said. 'In any case, if we're going back to his time, do you think it's wise? I mean, suppose you bump into him?

He'll think you're sending him up.'

The Doctor stood up. 'Breakfast, I think you said.'

Perhaps she'd gone too far. She'd hate to offend him.

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But when she was sitting solemnly munching her ration of two green pills and a red jelly baby, she peeped out of the corner of her eyes at him and knew that it was going to be all right.

He was peering into the mirror again and murmuring to himself.

'Ho, ho, ho,' he was saying in an experimental sort of way.

Dawn was breaking when they ran out of petrol. Their destination was no longer a mere loom of light over the edge of the world. The silhouette of the castle-topped island was quite clear - and clearly too far away for them to paddle.

Yet what was the alternative? Maggie had told Jeremy of Max's intention to take the castle. They had to warn the Brigadier.

But after half an hour, when Jeremy was starting to feel that his arm muscles were turning into lumps of jelly and the island seemed if anything to be even further away, Maggie suddenly threw her paddle onto the bottom of the boat and burst into tears.

'What's the freaking good of kidding ourselves?' she said. 'He's going to catch us up; and that means curtains for both.'

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Jeremy stopped paddling too and put out a tentative hand to touch

her shoulder. She looked really pretty in the rosy glow of the sunrise, even though her nose was alreadly starting to turn red and she'd got a smudge of oil on her cheek left over from when they were trying to get the engine to go; but that just made her !ook as if she needed sort of looking after and stuff. 'Don t cry,' he said. 'I'll think of something. I mean, there must be *something* we can do.'

He looked vaguely round the boat. Even if there'd been some sort of radio, they wouldn't have had a clue how to use it. In any case, there wasn't. It looked as if he was wrong and Maggie was right.

Hang on, though!

He got down on his knees and started to rummage iluough the tangle of ropes and assorted cans of oil and tools and whatnot under the front deck.

'What are you looking for?' asked Maggie damply.

'In films, they always send up rockets and flares and things. I thought that ...' His voice trailed away as he realized that there wasn't a sign of anything of the sort.

It wasn't fair! Even James Bond would be able to do anything in these circumstances. He turned round to Maggie, knowing that not even a comforting hug would really help either of them, desirable as it might be on other grounds.

His eyes lit up. 'Hey! Get up.'

'What?'

Under Maggie's bum, that's where they must be!

After a deal of confusion as she stood up, and nearly fell out of the boat as they changed places, he opened the lid of the box she'd been sitting on - and yesl A special fat pistol thingy with all the bits and pieces; and on the underside of the lid instructions on what to do.

Maggie was transformed. Grabbing hold of him, she gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek.

'You know what? You're a real smart cookie,' she said, and though he was blushing with pleasure and embarrasment, he decided that all in

all she was absolutely right.

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Fourteen

Dinner, which to Sarah's surprise came before noon, was a very different matter from the elegance of Louisa's five o'clock meal - or the rough and ready friendliness of Mario's evening table for that matter.

To start with, the great hall was crowded and noisy.

There were long trestle tables running down the sides of the hall with a very mixed bag of diners. Those at the head were clearly the gentlemen of the household (each attended by his own personal servant); prominent among them were the cavalieri, the knights who formed the officer corps of the castle garrison; the men-at-arrns themselves had their own table and were making by far the most noise, toasting each other in large goblets with loud bantering cries; while at the lowest end of the lowest tables sat the lesser servants, brought their food by kitchen ,scullions. Dogs roamed around the thickly strewn rushes on the floor, on the lookout for tit-bits of the many different meats on offer.

At the high table sat the Barone and his sad, silent wife.

The Doctor (with his neatly trimmed white beard) was on their right, as an honoured guest from far off Inghilterra, with his page Jack behind him, poised to pour his wine or otherwise minister to his slightest need. The black-177

clad Maximilian Vilmius sat on their left, massive and morose, eating little and saying less.

It was Sarah herself who had chosen to be called Jack (an English name from way back - wasn't the original Jack Straw one of Wat Tyler's bunch of rebels?) on the principle that it was bad enough having to pretend to be a boy – but an Italian boy…!

‘It is most kind of you, Signore, to allow me to see your library,’ the Doctor was saying. ‘I have been received with considerably less courtesy in many of the great houses of Christendom I have visited in my quest.’

Sarah was queueing up behind their hosts’ personal servants at the serving table to replace the jug of water and the bowl she’d held for

the Doctor to rinse his hands at the end of the first course – the second looked to be much the same as the first: a plethora of meat – but she could still hear the conversation quite clearly.

'We have some fine books, though few of them are printed,' replied the Barone. 'A number of them come from Spain, where I spent my youth.'

'It is the esoteric knowledge of the Arab world that I seek,' said the Doctor; and Sarah could have sworn that she saw Vilmius's head jerk round, but at that moment her elbow was jogged as Vilmius's page, a grinning bull-calf 178

with terminal acne, pushed past her, jumping the little queue.

'Watch it!' hissed Sarah, as water splashed out of her jug and onto her leg. He glanced down and gave a coarse snigger. Sarah followed his look. It certainly appeared as if she d had a very different sort of accident.

She came forward to the table, treading heavily on Pimple-face's foot. He let out a bellow loud enough to make all at the high table look round; and was rewarded by a clip over the ear from the Barone's servant.

Stupid, stu-u-upid! thought Sarah as she returned to her post under the glower of her new enemy. Why join in? They were here for a purpose.

She concentrated on the conversation again – and was horrified at what she heard. The Doctor had launched into a dissertation on alchemy, for Pete's sake, some stuff about the mystic marriage of the Sun and the Moon – Sol and Luna, as he called them. What did he think he was doing, showing his hand like that? And look at Maximilian, fixing a glittering gaze on the Doctor which looked more dangerous than the knife he was gripping like a dagger.

'You pursue the Great Work, Doctor?' he said.

'Alas, only as a scholar and a seeker of truth, Signore.

Such mystic arts as the transmutation of base lead into noble gold are reserved for more practical souls than I. For my 179

part, I hope to find my way to the world behind this mortal world of appearances. Where, as Raymond Lully says in his *Compendium Artis*

Alchemiae, "certain fugitive spirits condensed in the air in the shape of divers monsters, beasts and men move like the clouds hither and thither."

This was getting worse. He was talking about the fiends and the ghosts. Vilmius was going to sus him out at any minute!

The man himself was clearly going to challenge the Doctor in some way. His normally pale face was a livid red; he was gripping the edge of the table as if he were having to force himself to keep control; and he was leaning forward so that he could fix the Doctor with his eye.

'Where do you come from, Doctor?' he said hoarsely.

'Why do you come here, here to this little island, today of all days?'

The Doctor did not answer in words. Silently, he took from his pocket the little leather-bound book Sarah had seen before. He opened it and took out the scrap of vellum Jeremy had found.

'Jack,' he said. 'Be so good as to pass this to Signor Vilmius.'

Convinced that she was colluding in the inevitable precipitation of discovery and disaster, Sarah took the piece of parchment over.

Vilmius took it without looking at it. For a long moment he kept his eyes on the Doctor's face. Then he looked slowly down.

The effect was extraordinary – as if he were reading his death sentence, thought Sarah. His face, so far from being red, turned to the waxen white of a new corpse, the enormous hand which held the vellum was trembling like an old man's, his mouth was opening and closing like a gasping fish as he fought to speak.

'Where – where did you get this?' he managed to breathe at last.

Before the Doctor could answer, there was a sudden commotion at the end of the hall. The main door crashed open and an elderly man, an outdoor servant from his weatherworn face and his clothes, paused for a moment to catch his breath before running up between the tables towards his lord.

'Signore! Signore!' he was calling. The whole assembly had fallen to silence.

‘What is it?’ said the Barone, in some consternation, rising to his feet. But the old man could do nothing but wave his arm back towards the doorway. All eyes followed his gesture.

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Through the door appeared a man in his middle thirties, dark, tanned, good-looking. For a moment, Sarah had the strange sensation that she had seen his face before.

The Barone and his wife both rose to their feet as he walked down the middle of the silent hall. Then, with a quiet moan and a gasp, the Baronessa buckled at the knees and slid to the floor.

Sarah ran to her, pulling away the chair she had been sitting on, but even as she knelt by her, she was joined on the other side by the young man himself.

‘Mother,’ he said.

She opened her eyes. ‘Guido,’ she said. ‘Is it really you?’

Guido? The long-lost son? The son who was killed twelve years ago?

‘Yes, Mother,’ he replied. ‘I’ve come home.’

Helping his mother to her chair, his arm round her as though to enfold her in his loving care, he was seized in turn by his father in an enveloping hug. He tried to speak but his father stopped him and, taking him by the hand, proclaimed his return to the company in the words of the parable:

‘Behold my son, who was dead and is alive again; who was lost and is found!’

Oh, what a hustling and a bustling there was then! All feudal discipline was lost. Chaotic cheering and laughing 182

filled the air as all who had known Guido – and many others

– swarmed forward to greet him as he stood by his mother, who lifted his hand in the two of hers and covered it with kisses and tears.

Sarah was quite cut off. It was well-nigh impossible for her to move in any direction or to see what was going on.

But one thing she did see: Maximilian Vilmius taking advantage of the

hubbub to slip away, the scrap of parchment still in his hand; and the Doctor following after.

'…and so the harbour-master sent a boat out and they towed us in.'

The Brigadier felt ashamed of himself. He'd quite made up his mind that Jeremy had got sick of the whole business and sloped off on the first available ferry. After all, why shouldn't he? No affair of his, after all.

But here he was, bruised and battered, with the bonny lass from Brooklyn in tow, both telling the most extraordinary story (while managing to put away an extraordinarily large breakfast provided by the indefatigable Umberto). So well done, Jeremy. But if they were right, Max Vilmio was going to mount a full-frontal attack on the castle that very day.

After he'd managed to convince Maggie Pulacki that he wasn't the butler, he told them everything that the Doctor 183

had said about Max. They both were rather taken aback and he couldn't help noticing that she went a trifle green about the gills.

Not surprising, really. If she was shacking up with the fellow, which seemed pretty obvious, it must be something of a shock to find out that he was not so far off his five hundredth birthday. Like going to bed with your great great granddad.

'Now look here, chaps,' he said, having gathered them all together for a council of war, 'I've no idea what the fellow's after – something to do with all this ghostly mumbo-jumbo the Doctor's been on about, I expect – best left alone, all that sort of thing, if you ask me.

'Do you mind?' he added to Roberto who was lightly strumming an accompaniment to Mario's quavery attempt to mutate the ropey Elvis impression he'd been teaching him.

'I read you, man. Like, shoot with the soldier-speak.

Okay?'

'Right on,' said Uncle Mario.

The Brigadier sighed. 'Anyway, this place was built to withstand a siege. He's not going to have enough men to attack us as they did in the old days, with battering rams and siege engines and such. He can't

shoot through the outer walls even with an armour-piercing rifle. So provided we 184

keep out of his line of fire, the only thing we have to worry about is his getting over the outer wall; and even then, he'd have a tough job getting into the house. The whole point of a Norman keep is that it's impregnable.'

'What about the dead guy's little party tricks?' said Maggie, who'd looked even sicker when she realized that her boyfriend's right-hand man was more of a right-hand spook.

'Ah, yes. The joker in the pack, this monk chap who can walk through walls. Well, I've got a gun.'

'So have I,' said Uncle Mario, waving his blunderbuss in the air. 'Boom, boom.'

'Please, Uncle,' said the Brigadier, wincing.

'So the first thing to do,' he went on when the protesting Mario had been divested of his weapon, which he had already reloaded, 'is to close the outer door or gate or whatever you call it.'

'Can't,' said Mario, grumpily, with Umberto shaking his head synchronously behind him. 'Is stuck. Like Jack Robinson's thumb in his pie. Stuck for hundred, two hundred year.' And the Brigadier felt that if he'd known the words, he'd have added 'So there!'

As soon as the turmoil in the hall subsided, Sarah set off in search of the Doctor. It was almost certain, she decided, 185

that Maximilian had shot off to his alchemist's lair, so off she went down the interminable corridors, tracing her way through the busy life of the castle. Nobody took much notice of her, except when she took the wrong turning and found herself in a room full of women busy sewing and had to retreat under a barrage of medieval cat-calls and lewd suggestions.

At last she recognized where she was: in the last long corridor leading to a vaulted lobby much like the others but with a spiral staircase in the corner which led to the family rooms and up to the new clock tower (for it must have been built quite recently, she realized). This was very near the walled courtyard with its colonnades where the alchemist hung out. As she approached however she became aware, as Jeremy had earlier (or should that be later?), that someone was

following her. At this side of the building, far away from the servants' quarters, there weren't many people about.

Now what? she thought. People were always knocking each other off, weren't they, round about now? Borgias and Medicis and people. One thing she could certainly do without was a stiletto in the back.

Almost without thinking, she repeated the strategy which had worked before, slipping into the gloom of one of the turnings off the lobby. The clumping footsteps were 186

very near now and she pressed herself against the cold hard stone, wishing that she could still vanish through it.

At last, her pursuer appeared, short, stocky and bullet-headed. Oh God, it was Pimple-face!

She must have made a sound, for he swung round and with a cry of triumph pounced on her and dragged her by the wrist into the light of the window.

'Tread – on – my – toe, would you?' Each word was accompanied by a vicious punch on the arm. Unfortunately it was the arm which had been so badly bruised.

'Yes. I'm sorry,' she gasped through her pain and tried to pull away, only to have him grab her by the other wrist as well and haul her towards him until their noses were almost touching. His stinking breath made her turn her head away, but he let go her wrist and seized her chin, twisting her face towards him and squeezing her cheeks until she almost screamed…

'A pox on your "sorry"!' he said, letting go to deal her a short jab to the solar plexus which left her winded and nearly helpless.

Frantically scrabbling at her side, she managed to find the hilt of the dagger and desperately tried to pull it from its scabbard. Another blow, a backhander across her face knocked her flying across the lobby to strike herself a cruel blow on the stone pillar behind her.

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He made to follow her, but suddenly there was a third figure present. It was the long-lost Guido – and he had his arm round Pimple-face's neck, yanking him back so hard that his feet left the floor.

Throwing him down so that he collapsed in a scared heap on the mosaic floor, Guido stood over him, ready to grab him again if he showed fight. But he knew when he was outclassed. Scrambling to his feet, he backed away towards the corridor he'd come from. He turned a last snarl on Sarah, hissing, 'You wait till tonight!' Guido made for him and he turned and fled, helped on his way by the man's boot.

'Are you all right, lad?'

'Thank you, yes,' she answered manfully in spite of the new crop of hurts. 'But I don't think I should have been if you hadn't turned up.'

He noticed her hand still on the hilt of her dagger. 'He's not worth a stretched neck,' he said with a smile and turned to go up the spiral stairs.

If it had not been for the fiend, it would have been a tediously long job, if not downright impossible, to free the solid wooden gate (getting on for a foot thick) that closed the only way in through the outer wall.

Having cleared away two hundred years' worth of debris from the base, and dolloped about a pint of Umberto's best olive oil onto the ornate hinges, they were all vainly pulling on a rope attached to the heavy ring handle of the latch, like a tug-of-war team at a village fete.

The Brigadier was anchor man, with the end of the rope wrapped round his back so that he could use all his weight, and the others (bar Umberto, who had been detailed off to make some sandwiches) were strung out in front of him in a rough order of body size and strength.

Jeremy was doing his best not to feel fed up. After all, he had won his spurs, hadn't he? (Though what spurs had to do with it…) He'd shown everybody that he wasn't a wimp or a wally. Yet the Brig hadn't actually said anything, even though he'd patted him on the back in a sort of a well-done sort of way; and Maggie, in spite of what she'd said on the boat, seemed more interested in the attentions of old man Mario and the horrible Roberto and his soupy voice.

'Once more,' called the Brigadier. 'One, two, three, heave!' It was as they were all obediently heaving that he saw it, lolloping towards them from the pile of stones which was all you could see of the collapsed wall at the rear of the compound.

It was only a small fiend compated with the others. In fact, he thought at first that it was a dog; it was only when it 189

got near enough for him to see that it had six legs – or was it eight? – and a face like a furry duck, that he realized what he was looking at.

'One, two, three –'

'Look out!' yelled Jeremy, letting go and pointing. This was a mistake; for not only did all the others bar the Brigadier also let go, thus altering the angle of the rope so that his feet slipped from under him and he ended up on his bottom, but the fiend must have taken Jeremy's gesture as a possible attack. It reared up on its hinder legs like an oversized caterpillar and pointed a clawed foot at him. A flash as of lightning caught him on the shoulder and sent him spinning.

'Get down!' shouted the Brigadier.

Never could an order have been so promptly obeyed.

Collapsing on the ground, his troops with one accord covered their heads with their hands; as if mere flesh and bone could protect them from the spray of energy bolts seeking their destruction.

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Fifteen

'What do you reckon he meant by "You wait till tonight"?' said Sarah, when she'd told the Doctor about her encounter with Pimple-face.

The Doctor hardly seemed to be listening. He was adjusting a calibrated scale on the shank of an odd-looking object which he said was his 'sonic screwdriver', which he had told her was useful for opening locks (among other things).

The door he intended to unlock was of course that of the alchemist's workshop.

When Sarah had come out into the courtyard after Guido had left her, she had seen the Doctor apparently peeping into the little building in the corner through the small window. He noticed her at once and motioned to her to hide, as he did himself in the corner of the covered walkway.

Almost immediately, the door opened and Maximilian Vilmius

emerged, grim-faced, followed by the monk figure.

It was difficult to believe that he was a ghost – one of the N-Bodies, as the Doctor called them.

Vilmius locked the door behind them with a heavy key and they walked across the grass in the centre of the courtyard, through the arch in the dividing wall and into the 191

walled garden on the other side. After a moment, the Doctor stuck his head out and beckoned her over.

'Glad to see you,' he murmured to her. 'Just as I hoped, he led me straight to where he's hidden the original of that document you found. So you can keep watch while I take a look.'

But then he'd pulled out the thing that looked like a hi-tech tyre gauge and started an interminable series of minute adjustments, listening intently to its buzz (which sounded exactly the same every time).

Sarah had been rubbing her face where she'd been thumped. 'What's up?' he'd said. So she told him.

'What do you reckon he meant by "You wait till tonight"?' she finished.

'Mm? Oh, I expect the pages and the other lads all share the same bedroom – unless you all sleep in the kitchen of course.'

'What!'

'That should do it,' he said, after another test buzz. He set off towards the doorway. 'They've gone off to the library to check something in one of the Barone's hermetic books. So we've a bit of time. You saw the way they went, so you can keep an eye open through the archway and tip me the wink if they come out of the house. Right?'

192

He grinned as he took in her appalled expression as she contemplated the delights of a night spent with Pimple-face and his buddies. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'Everybody will understand if the master insists that he wants his page to stay with him.

'No, no,' he added hastily. 'I'm not suggesting that you should share my room. It's the custom for the servant to sleep lying across the

threshold.'

'You mean, on the floor? Like a dog?'

'Mm. My faithful hound.'

Sarah wasn't quite sure whether to take this as a compliment. But before she could object some more, he turned to the door of the workshop and aimed the sonic screwdriver at it. Out came the usual buzz, there was a satisfying clonk from the lock and the Doctor opened the door.

'Hang on,' she said. 'If I do see them how do I warn you, if I'm right over there by the arch?'

'How good's your barking?' he said and disappeared inside.

Before Sarah could move, her eye was caught by a movement in the doorway she had herself just come through. She drew back, ready to alert the Doctor. But it 193

was Guido who appeared, carrying a lute. He walked across the grass and went through into the garden.

For a moment, Sarah was in a quandary. But there seemed no likelihood of his coming back; and when she heard the notes of plucked strings and the sound of his song, she walked quietly across to the archway and stood in its shadow, where she could keep an eye on the farther house door and listen to the honeyed tones of Guido's voice at the same time.

It was a sad song, which spoke of lost dreams, of the loneliness of the wanderer far from home, of the never to be satisfied yearning of unrequited love.

Guido was sitting on a low wall which surrounded a plinth dripping with jasmine flowers with a classical statue

– Venus? – surmounting it. He was half turned away from Sarah; she was sure that he could not see her; but when the song came to its dying fall, and the last sweet note lingered in the sun-soaked air, he spoke quietly.

'Well, young man,' he said, 'do you think well of your minstrel?'

Sarah could hardly answer for a moment. She had been quite sure that

she had put into the past the death of Waldo and the loss of the love that never was. But now her heart was full of an ache which held all the emotion of that time, yet still was forgiving of the pain of it.

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'Why are you so sad?' she said at last.

It was his turn to pause, turning to look across the formal garden with its rectangular flower beds and stone ornaments.

'I remember once, when I was yet not breeched, I stole a sweetmeat – my favourite – from my mother's bedside.

But when I came to taste my prize, it turned to ashes on my tongue.' He turned back to her. 'I have dreamed these ten years and more of my return. Yet now that I am here…'

Again he turned away. 'How can I tell my mother, who lies abed, unable to contain such joy – or my father, who even now plans the slaughter of his fatted calves – that I have come to steal their love with lies?'

'You mean, you're not really Guido at all?'

'Oh, I'm their son, if ever they had a son. But not the Guido, the gallant knight, who left them – an age ago – to fight the infidel in Spain. My company all gave their lives, you see, in the taking of Granada; but I had left them long before.'

He rose to his feet, leaving the lute on the wall, and strode up and down in agitation.

'Why should I kill for the country which binds my Sicily in chains? My father holds his land in fee from Aragon, but his father's fathers were free men all.'

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He stopped and turned to her once more. 'I did not fight. For this long age I've roamed the countries of the world, to every corner of the old Empire and beyond, singing my songs to earn my bread: a minstrel, loved by some, despised by many. And to my father, if not my mother, that must be the action of a traitor; a traitor and a coward. And who's to say he'd not be right?'

He was near enough to Sarah for her to see the glisten of the tears in his eyes.

'But surely…' She stopped, not knowing what to say.

She tried again: 'Let's face it, they're over the moon to have you back; I mean, they're so pleased that they wouldn't mind if you'd been a beggar or a – a horse thief, or something. If you explained why, they'd understand, I'm sure.'

He smiled ruefully and shook his head. 'My father prizes his honour beyond rubies. He'd hound me from his gates like the vagabond that I've become.'

'And wouldn't even that be better?' said Sarah passionately. 'Could you live a lie, *be* a lie, for the rest of your life?'

He didn't answer. Then he sighed and walked over to pick up his lute. 'What's your name, lad?'

'Jack. Jack Smith.'

'An honest name; a name to bear with pride. You are young still, Jack, and –'

'I'm not as young as I look,' said Sarah, her own heartache buried beneath the desperate desire to help his anguish.

It was almost as if she could see m the darkness of his eyes a yearning for the innocence he had once known, for a time when the choices life offered had seemed quite simple.

'It was a foolish dream,' he said, and walked past her through the arch and across the grass; and as she watched him disappear through the door, she did not know whether he meant his romantic desertion or his unhappy return.

'Woof, woof?'

It was the Doctor, peeping out of the door of the workshop.

Guiltily checking the door through which Max Vilmius might have come back (but hadn't, thank goodness), Sarah gave an all-clear wave and ran across.

On their way back, the Doctor gave her a potted account of what he'd learnt; necessarily in dribs and drabs because he had to shut up whenever they met anybody.

Yes he'd found the document and it was what he feared: A Latin translation of a Spanish version of an Arabic extract from a Greek text taken from an Egyptian original probably 197

penned by the legendary Mercurius, Hermes Trismegistus himself, who was, so esoteric tradition had it, none other than the god Thoth.

'Everybody knows that what the alchemist was searching for was the philosopher's stone, which would turn base metal into gold, and produce the elixir of life. But that's a vulgar misunderstanding of the true quest,' he was saying as they hurried through the long corridor which was apparently a short-cut to the stairway to his room. 'The adept's real goal was the direct apprehension of reality itself

– the attainment of spiritual immortality if you like. Ssh!'

As they passed the sweet-creamery smell of the dairy (Sarah could see them through the door actually churning the butter), the Doctor's long-striding haste gave way to the dignified stroll of the philosopher-sage, giving his poor long-suffering page a chance to catch his/her breath.

'But Maximilian wants – wanted – oh, phooey! He wants to live forever on earth, isn't that right?'

'Right. The two things were always linked. "As above, so below" as the old alchemical saying has it. But it was always more than a symbol. I know what you're going to say; you're going to say that it isn't dissimilar to the Taoist quest for longevity as a sign of spiritual purity –'

Was she? Sarah was having difficulty keeping up in more ways than one.

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'– and of course you're right –'

Oh, goody.

'– but in practical terms we know that the two things can be separated. The highest aim can always be corrupted.

The “marriage of Sol and Luna” is the alchemist’s code for the combining into one of the earthly body and the N-Body.

That’s what the *elixir vitae* is all about. That’s the secret that Max’s document contains. And that’s what he’s going to try to achieve – at midnight tonight!’

Luckily the fiend wasn’t very efficient. After the first lucky shot which knocked Jeremy over (and scorched his shirt), its attack seemed to be little more than a random spray, like somebody watering the garden and missing the flowers at the front of the border; shrinking violets on this particular occasion.

Even as the Brigadier rolled onto his front from the undignified posture he’d landed in, he was going for the stun-gun in his belt, and managed to get a pot-shot at the little furry horror within seconds.

As he did so, he half expected to experience his usual feeling of frustration when trying to deal with the creatures he thought of as ‘the Doctor’s monsters’. ‘No good shooting at it,’ he’d so often heard the Doctor say. ‘It’s impervious to bullets.’

But then he realized that he’d succeeded admirably. He must have hit it square on, for it reared up even higher, uttered a strange cry something between a squeal and a yelp, turned and scampered back the way it had come.

‘Good hunting!’ cried Mario, as it disappeared behind the house, hopefully to go back from whence it came, ‘You one lousy good shooter, Alistair.’

A comprehensive description, thought the Brigadier, and not far from the truth, taken over all. He’d better post the old codger as look-out; they mustn’t be surprised again, and with his weight and strength he’d hardly be missed on gate detail; and it was obviously going to take them some considerable time to get the ruddy thing moving.

But when the rest of them had reluctantly taken up their positions on the rope like a string of ill-assorted beads, they found that the cumbersome great lump of wood swung away from the wall as easily as the newly-hung front door of a suburban semi.

Upon investigation it transpired from the scorch mark that one of the fiend’s stray bolts had struck the wall just at the right point to jolt the

gate from its two-hundred-year rest.

‘Well I must say, well done that fiend,’ said Jeremy, rubbing his shoulder. ‘I thought it was rather a jolly little 200

creature. Wouldn’t have minded it for a pet. I mean, just think of taking it for a walk round the Serpentine!’

‘Yeah,’ said Maggie, joining in the game. ‘You could take it to the Waldorf and train it to poop off at all the stuffed shirts and their snooty wives who turn up their noses at you.’

‘Like, dig that crazy hound-dog, man,’ said Roberto.

‘Like, hotcha diggerty,’ said Uncle Mario.

. Not for the first time, the Brigadier thought that Fate might have dealt him a better hand of cards with which to play the forthcoming match.

Having inserted the balk of timber which would ensure that the gate lately closed would stay that way, the Brigadier walked all the defenders round the top of the wall to make sure that everybody understood what they were about. Of course, it was not possible to make a tour of the complete perimeter, owing to the portion which had collapsed down the cliff. But then it was hardly likely that Max and his friends would tackle a climb which would defeat anybody but the most skilful of mountaineers, The walkabout finished at the top of the gate tower where they could watch for the arrival of the Vilmio boat.

Here Umberto met them with a pre-1914 picnic basket charged with chicken drumsticks, slices of cold ham cut 201

from the bone, hard-boiled seagulls’ eggs, salad, freshly baked ciabatta bread, and four bottles of chilled spumante.

The tower, commanding as it did the approach road and the whole front wall, was ideally situated to be the Brigadier’s HQ, as well as the firing position for the main armament.

In fact, the Doctor’s stun-gun was the only armament, the blunderbuss having been banned by a tacit consensus which excluded only its owner, who very nearly refused the loan of his spyglass in reprisal.

The picnic party was surprisingly festive, considering that they were

awaiting an assault by an enemy known to be not only utterly ruthless, but also endowed with powers unknown.

'Hit it, Elvis!' cried a too giggly Maggie, who was much more effervescent than two glasses of bubbly would warrant.

Roberto, who had been quietly strumming 'Jail House Rock' in the corner (only slightly off-key), flushed with pleasure, and obliged with 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?'

complete with hooded eyelids and pelvic accompaniment.

Thus inspired, Maggie herself swayed over to the King (or should it be the Pretender? thought the Brigadier, watching dispassionately) to outdo anything he could think up in the way of lascivious movement, which was the major aspect of his talent.

202

Not to be outdone, Jeremy – who had been prevented from drowning his sorrows and his wits in a fourth glass only by the timely intervention of the Brigadier – tried to catch her eye by jigging solemnly from one foot to the other, while singing along in a gentle moo, half a syllable in arrears.

In the meantime, Uncle Mario was swivelling skinny hips in a curious gyration which the Brigadier identified with some difficulty as an early version of the Black Bottom, which his mother also used to break into when celebrating the birth of Christ with a few unaccustomed drams of the malt.

Let them enjoy themselves while they can, thought the Brigadier, as he turned his back on the jollity and saw that the *Princess M.* was approaching the harbour from the west.

They're not likely to be lonesome tonight.

203

Sixteen

'But we know already that he succeeds in becoming immortal. That's why we're here!'

'Ah, but he not only intends to drink the elixir of life,'

said the Doctor. 'Why do you think he is going to do it just before

midnight, local time? Because that is the moment, the moment when there is no today, only yesterday and tomorrow, when he can break through into N-space, in his immortal body, and gain control of the evil power of the N-Forms. Tonight is the night that the ancient astrology of the Egyptians tells him that he can become master of the world.'

They were back where they could talk safely, in the Doctor's room, a room deemed suitable for a philosopher and a scholar with no money and no influence; bare of frivolous decoration, with simple wooden chairs and a hard plank bed with a straw palliasse for a mattress. Now that they were back – and after the breathless rush through the bowels of the keep, Sarah was glad to sit down even on the unyielding seat of a philosophical stool – the Doctor's haste seemed to have quite disappeared.

'Because my beard was coming off,' he answered when she now asked him why he had hurried so. (So that was why he'd bolted the door.) Sitting down and taking a small 204

looking-glass from his pocket, he propped it up on the table and added, 'And because I have to have time to consider what to do.'

'How to stop him, you mean?'

He sighed. 'My dear Sarah Jane. You are looking at a man, for want of a better word, who is a convicted criminal.

I have been judged guilty by my peers of the unutterable sin of intervention in the affairs of the peoples of this universe; one of the worst crimes any time traveller can commit, or so I've always been told.'

'Changing the course of history, do you mean?'

He peered into the mirror and started to peel pieces of whisker from his face. 'That's an expression with no meaning. I admit, as a quick way of making a point, I've sometimes fallen victim to its seductive charm, but…' His voice trailed away as he squinted into the mirror, seeking loose hairs.

'There is no way you can change the course of history.

History is simply what has happened. The present moment is all that exists; there is no future yet; the past has gone.

You mustn't make the mistake of thinking that the future is sitting there already, waiting for us. The future is simply the sum total of the logical consequences of this moment, compounded with all the decisions made by creatures of 205

free will – and there are more of those than you might imagine.'

He pulled off a few more tufts of whisker and inspected them closely. By now, he looked as if he was suffering from some hideous moulting disease.

'We haven't come back to put right something that went wrong the first time round. There is no first time round apart from this one. The very fact that we are here means we are included in it. At this moment there is an infinite number of possible futures. But once this present moment has gone by, from the point of view of the future it has happened, it is history; and from the point of view of the past, it was going to happen. Are you still with me?'

Sarah's head was beginning to spin. 'Hanging on to your coat tails,' she said. 'I think.'

He laughed. 'I like the image,' he said. 'I'll give you another one. The course of time, if we could stand back and look at it the way the TARDIS does when she's in the Time Vortex, is like a mountain stream, a waterfall tumbling through the rocks; a cascade of events, constantly flowing but with a clear shape formed by the interaction of the moving streams. Now, if I throw a small pebble into the water at the top, is it going to change that shape?'

'I guess not.'

206

'No, not in the normal course of events. But a great rock? Who can tell what might happen? And for that matter, even a small one might change the flow of one small stream of water in the torrent, and that might work on the bank at a weak point and nibble at it and nibble at it until the bank collapses – and the whole course and shape of the river has been changed.

'So have I changed the course of history? Now that it's happened, it was always going to happen. But the responsibility for my choice is as heavy now as it is in any present moment I find myself experiencing.'

He was beginning to look a bit less moth-eaten now, as he repaired his

hairy work of art.

Sarah sat silent, trying to digest what he'd been saying.

Was it true that the Brigadier and Jeremy and everything they'd left behind – her own birth for that matter – didn't exist at this moment except as an abstract complex of possibilities? Then what was she doing there? Where had she come from? And what about…?

'I read up about time travel after we first went into the past together,' she said. 'What about the time paradoxes?

You know, like I go into the past and kill my grandpa as a boy, before he's even met my grandma?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor, holding down the last few hairs with a firm handkerchief, 'the result of even trying would be 207

a perfect example of the most extreme result of the Blinovitch limitation effect.'

'Well thank you, Doctor. Now I understand completely.'

'No need to be sarky, miss,' said, the Doctor, standing up an putting his mirror away. 'I'm going to explain.

Funnily enough, people are always asking me to explain Blinovitch. It's the Blinovitch limitation effect which makes it very nearly impossible to cross your own time line – to go back and meet yourself in the past or re-experience your own history.'

'And put things right.'

'Exactly. The effect had been known empirically ever since time travel began, but it took a human philosopher working all by himself in the reading room of the British Museum to construct a plausible theory for it. In 1928, Aaron Blinovitch – are you listening carefully? It s quite a tortuous explanation.'

'Are you sitting comfortably?' said Sarah. Then I'll begin.'

'Eh?'

'I can't wait,' said Sarah.

'Well now – the Blinovitch limitation effect, to put it as simply as possible, is –'

A sharp knock at the door; the handle turned. ‘Who is it?’ called the Doctor. A voice, urgent in tone: Doctor. My Lord requests your presence in the great hall. At once, if you please.’

The Doctor crossed to the door and unbolted it.

Standing outside was one of the cavalieri, a knight-at-arms with behind him a soldier in the chain mail of the duty guard, with a drawn sword loosely held, ready for instant action.

The Doctor lifted an eyebrow. ‘Thank you,’ said the officer. ‘If you would be so good…’ He gestured for the Doctor to precede him. He looked past the Doctor at Sarah, lurking uneasily in the background, hoping not to be noticed.

‘You too, boy,’ he said.

After the high-jinks on the gate-tower, the not-yet-besieged garrison settled down to wait. Maggie tried to insist on doing the washing-up, which so offended the rigid code of behaviour encrypted in Umberto’s DNA after centuries of selective breeding, that it took a deal of negotiation, including a lengthy summary of her working class antecedents, before she was allowed even to help him.

The other three were each allotted a tower as a post from which to keep watch, which proved so onerous an 209

assignment that they found it necessary, as each in turn explained to the Brigadier on his rounds, to close their eyes

‘to rest them for a moment’.

The Brigadier returned to his eyrie on the gate tower, ignoring the snores of the resident lookout (Jeremy, doubling as dogsbody), and again inspected the yacht, which by this time was secured to the harbour wall. There seemed to be quite a lot of activity.

He had a closer look, with the aid of Mario’s telescope, which was so old that it painted a rainbow round all the edges. There were more of them than he liked to see; and wasn’t that…? Yes, by George, it was: a gun, hastily hidden, but not soon enough; a nastily modem type of gun at that, capable of being used as a single shot rifle of great accuracy or switching to automatic firing to rival that of the recent fiend.

The thought of the successful repulse of the enemy in the rear comforted the Brigadier somewhat, as he remembered that Max had no idea that he would be able to keep his pet ghost at bay. Indeed, it was to be hoped that he was basing his entire strategy on the use of this secret weapon, for if not…

And the Brigadier at last allowed himself to think the thought that had been hovering on the edge of his 210

consciousness ever since he first heard of Vilmio's imminent attack.

If he himself had been ordered to take the castle, he wouldn't bother with ladders, or battering rams, or any of that nonsense – or ghosts. There was only one foolproof way of getting over the perimeter wall.

If Max Vilmio brought in a helicopter, they were sunk.

To Sarah's consternation, the great hall seemed to be set out as if for a trial. The Doctor and she were marched between two ranks of men-at-arms who kept back the assembled members of the household. Standing behind the high table, surrounded by his knights, stood the Barone, set of face and still. Behind his right shoulder was Guido, who gave her a sympathetic shake of his head. This was none of his doing, it seemed to say.

On the Barone's left stood Maximilian, upright and stern the very picture of unalloyed rectitude.

'May I ask why I have been brought here in this unseemly fashion?' said the Doctor. That's my boy thought Sarah. Get in first.

'Nay, Doctor – if that is truly what you are. It is for me to ask why you have come to my house to peddle your iniquity.'

'I assure you that my –'

211

'Be silent!' The edgy temper of the essentially weak man flashed out.

'You come to the realm of Their Most Catholic Majesties to attempt to suborn and seduce to your satanic craft one of the most faithful sons of our Holy Mother Church! Your foolishness is as vast as your wickedness, it would seem.'

What was he talking about? thought Sarah.

The Doctor, on the other hand, looked as if he knew exactly what was going on. ‘Whatever you have been told, my lord –’ he started to say.

‘Did I not see with my own eyes how you sullied the hospitality of my house by passing a secret message to my kinsman under my very nose?’

So that was it!

The Barone was holding up the piece of vellum she had given to Maximilian. ‘Master Vilmius has explained to me how these base words are but a fraction of a spell to raise the spirits of the dead! Necromancy is the work of the Devil; and those who practise it the Devil’s servants.’

Sarah could see that Maximilian’s lips were twitching.

The gleam of triumph in his eye was more than she could bear.

‘You’ve got it all wrong!’ she cried. ‘It’s not the Doctor who –’

A shudder and a gasp ran right through the whole assembly.

‘Silence, villain!’

It was the officer who had arrested them who spoke. A servant had no rights. If it were possible, she’d made matters worse.

‘May I speak, my lord?’ said the Doctor, quietly.

‘Why should I listen to yet more of your lies? It is within my power to have you hanged this very hour.

However, to show the people the mercy of their lords, enjoined on them by the word of God Himself I shall grant the lenity your foreign deviltry ill deserves. Tomorrow you will be taken to Palermo, there to await the question of the Holy Inquisition.’

The Doctor bowed. ‘You are most kind,’ he said for all the world as if he were thanking him for telling him the way to Piccadilly Circus.

‘Take him away. Throw him into the deepest dungeon, where he cannot practise his evil art; and take his catamite with him.’

The soldier seized the Doctor’s arm, but at a gesture from the officer

stepped back. With a slight inclination of his head, the Doctor moved in dignity towards the door.

Sarah followed close behind, but could not bring herself to forego a last glance at Maximilian Vilmius.

213

He was openly smiling.

For a long time after the door slammed behind them, they said nothing. What was there to say?

'I'm sorry,' the Doctor said at last.

Sarah grunted.

'All right, all right,' said the Doctor, after another long pause. 'There's no need to go on about it. My strategy was a mistake. It was aimed at flushing him out, making him reveal himself; and it has succeeded in producing exactly the opposite result. It seems our discussion about the rights and wrongs of intervention was a trifle academic. We're effectively barred from any action whatsoever.'

She couldn't even say, I told you so, thought Sarah, because she hadn't. It had seemed so obviously a daft thing to do, letting Max see that they were on to him.

The Doctor seemed more despondent than she'd ever known him. Well, serve him right. Let him stew for a bit.

Oh yes. One more thing…

'Does catamite mean what I think it does?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Ah,' said Sarah.

They were sitting in the semi-darkness of an underground chamber which Sarah guessed would become Umberto's (or more strictly, Mario's) wine cellar. The only 214

light came from a brick-sized opening high up the wall near the ceiling. When they came in she'd had to dodge thick cobwebs which hung down like noisome stalactites; and the stink of the years caught at her throat.

Silence.

‘I suppose there’s a good reason why you’re not using your fancy screwdriver contraption to open the door.’

‘There is. It only works on locks. This door is barred and bolted.’

‘I thought that might be it.’

More silence.

‘So what do we do now?’

‘There’s nothing we can do but wait.’

‘Where have I heard that before?’ said Sarah bitterly.

As the hours crawled by, Sarah’s anger subsided, to give way to a sort of resignation. Yes, that was the word, she decided. It certainly wasn’t acceptance, but there wasn’t a lot of point in giving yourself indigestion over something that couldn’t be changed.

Indigestion? Huh! Chance would have been a fine thing.

It was hunger as much as anything which was making her so ratty, she decided. In the normal course of events, those servants who waited on table would have their food afterwards; what with one thing and another, the moment 215

for bringing up the question had never seemed to come; and the so-called breakfast on board the TARDIS seemed days ago. But it wasn’t really fair to take it out on the Doc.

She listened to the faint striking of the tower clock and automatically counted its chimes… nine, ten, eleven. Only an hour to go.

The Doctor had obviously had the same thought. ‘It’s remarkable how accurate they manage to keep that clock, he said. They must check it every day against a sundial. In fact, it’s remarkable that they have a clock at all. It can only have been put in very recently – even after they built the tower and the extension at the back of the keep.’

‘How do you know it’s accurate?’ said Sarah indignantly. ‘Did you bring a watch with you, after all?’

The Doctor shook his head and smiled wryly. ‘If you want to know the time, ask a Time Lord,’ he said.

How could he joke at a time like this? All their efforts had gone for nothing; and there was nothing they could do about it.

Maximilian had won.

216

Seventeen

Guido Verconti finished writing the letter: '…and begs your blessing and forgiveness. Your loving son…', and signed his name. He put down his quill and sanded the wet ink; and as he read over what he had written, the tears at last began to flow.

Images sprang up in his mind, images from the long lost time when the child could dream his days away Without a care, cradled in his mother's devotion and his father's pride; and he wept for them all.

But Jack Smith had said the truth of it. To live a lie, was that the way he said it? Aye, to be a lie; that's what he said; like a rogue at a goose fair who played a part the better to cozen you of your purse. Would that redeem his sin, the cruelty of his absence for these many years? And yet….

He'd left his father celebrating still, in the privacy of his chamber, long after the end of the feast in honour of the prodigal, on the promise of his return to share the last of the flagon. His mother had long since retired, quite worn out by the hours of joy – and the years of sorrow, to which he would now be adding another lifetime of grief.

He sealed the letter and addressed it to his mother with a heavy heart; knowing that there was no other way; 217

wishing that he could live his life again. But would he choose a different course?

He lifted his head and listened as the clock chimed eleven. Most of the castle would be asleep by now. Before he faced his father with the truth, he had a debt to pay.

In class today we learnt more about penguins than we wanted to know.

She knew exactly how the kid felt, thought Sarah, having heard in detail what was in the secret document. She was finding it hard to listen to anything other than her shouting stomach.

‘Mark you,’ the Doctor was saying, ‘if the alchemical instructions are correct, he won’t have long.’

‘No?’ Bread and water would do. Correction. Bread and water would be scrummy.

‘The crack in the barrier which will allow him to break through into N-space will start to open shortly before midnight, and seconds into tomorrow it will close again That is perfectly clear. However, I must say that I’m still puzzled by the reference to the dragon.’

‘Under the wing of the dragon,’ said Sarah. ‘Yes, I remember that.’ She remembered fish and chips, too.

Weren’t they a sort of – what was that word again? Oh yes, food.

‘The dragon in medieval alchemy is often confused with the dragon of Christian mythology; the dragon slain by St George; the evil one, to be mystically vanquished. And sometimes its blood is referred to; a reference to red sulphur. But this is an Egyptian text. I think it must refer to Ouroboros. That’s his Greek name, of course.’

Perhaps her head was swimming with hunger. ‘And who s Ouroboros when he’s at home?’

‘A winged snake, crowned like a king, forever eating his own tail. Another symbol of the unification of opposites

– like the Yin/Yang sign. There you are you see, Taoism again.’

‘Well, what do you know,’ said Sarah. Penguins would be better than this. Penguins. Would they taste fishy?

A noise; a clatter and a bump at the door. Somebody was opening it. They’d never bring food at this time of night; and surely they wouldn’t…? The thought stopped abruptly with a gulp of fear.

The Doctor had slipped behind the door, and was frantically waving at her to join him.

The door edged open slowly, with a creak and a groan.

A whisper: ‘Jack? Doctor? Are you there?’

He led them hastily through winding ways to a small room near the

front of the keep which seemed to be a sort of 219

tack room. Bridles, saddles and stirrups, and other bits of horsy gear which Sarah didn't recognize lay about in neat profusion.

'You'll be safe here until dawn, he said in a hurried undertone. 'If you change your appearance – not to appear so well-born, you understand – you should be able to leave as soon as the main gate is opened. There is always such a coming and a going that another couple of bodies will be neither here nor there.'

He made to leave.

'I thank you, sir,' said the Doctor.

'Yes, thank you, Guido,' said Sarah.

'Nay, lad,' he answered, grasping her by the hand and looking deep into her eyes. 'It is I who should thank you.

Perchance we shall meet again one day. I go by the name of Guido il Menestrello. If not, fare thee well.'

He was gone.

The Doctor turned at once to Sarah. 'Now listen,' he said. 'I must go at once to the Maximilian workshop. I must find out exactly what happens tonight, or I shall be completely at a loss when we get back. The best thing you can do –'

'But we've got a chance of stopping him now!'

220

The Doctor continued as if she hadn't spoken. 'The best thing you can do is to change gender again. Guido was right. Find a frock somewhere.'

A frock! Yes Mummy, of course Mummy. 'I'm coming with you.'

'You certainly are not. It's far too dangerous.'

'But Doctor –!'

The Doctor was at the door. 'Now, be a good girl and do as you're told,' he said. 'I'll meet you here after midnight.'

In his turn, he too was gone.

Sarah was in two minds whether to ignore the Doctor and follow him – or better still, forget the whole thing, find the dairy and nick some cheese. The patronizing old beggar.

Be a good girl, indeed! Clorinda had tried saying that once and even Sarah herself had been surprised at the breadth of the vocabulary she'd acquired during her early days in the rough and tumble of local Scouse journalism.

In the end, however, she set off to look for the sewing room (to find a 'frock'!) which she had discovered by mistake when she'd gone after the Doctor earlier. After all, it was Guido's suggestion really; and the thought of hanging round waiting to have a bit of a chat with the Spanish Inquisition…

221

But it was taking a wrong turning again and finding herself at the bottom of the stairs which led up to the first floor of the newly built addition to the castle which brought her to a standstill. She was seized by the sudden thought: If Max is going to go by the chimes of midnight, then maybe I can stop him myself. I can stop the clock!

The only light in the darkness of the courtyard was the flickering yellow square of window in the comer. The wind from the sea was soughing through the colonnaded cloisters like the sighing of a thousand lost souls lamenting an eternity of suffering.

The Doctor's black robe flapped around his ankles as he made his way, head down against the thrust of the wind, to the workshop wall. He took a cautious look through the window.

Maximilian was standing at his bench, compounding his potion – his *elixir vitae* – with the mortar and pestle. By his side, a chased silver goblet awaited the final brew. The ghostly friar was nowhere to be seen; but then, the Doctor's view of the room was limited.

At the back of the bench an hour-glass was counting the grains of time to midnight; there was much less than a quarter of the sand left to fall. On the hearth of the alchemical furnace behind, the retort now contained a 222

blood-red viscous fluid, bubbling like a volcano from Hell, and was dripping a golden drop at a time into a bowl of strangely carved

chalcedony.

As Vilmius worked, he was reading from the manuscript which the Doctor had seen earlier. His voice, a low rumble, could just be heard through the thick walls, mouthing the Latin words in a gruff parody of Gregorian plainsong. At intervals, before he added another ingredient from the array of vials and flasks before him, he raised the mortar in offering, as though it were a chalice, to the blank stone wall before him.

As midnight approached his movements quickened and his words came faster, until they merged into an unintelligible clatter of syllables, coming through the wall in waves of sound, louder and louder until, with an almost palpable shock, they stopped dead, with only the shushing of the wind to mock the sudden stillness.

In silence he took the carved bowl from beneath the retort. In silence he poured a carefully judged measure of the golden liquid into the mortar, stirred it thoroughly and in silence transferred the final mixture to the waiting goblet.

Holding the vessel on high, he chanted in measured tones, in a loud sonorous voice, four words only: 'Eba! Eba!

Kapash Calb!'

223

On the wall before him a golden glow appeared, flickering like St Elmo's fire round the edges of the stones which formed the wall; and outside the window, the watcher in black was gripping his arms to his body so tight that his knuckles gleamed whitely in the darkness, as if he were holding back an impulsive child who struggled to escape.

To reach the clock chamber, high in the tower, Sarah had to traverse the gallery of the family rooms on the first floor where the Barone and Baronessa had their private apartments.

Here was the luxury she had seen when she was visiting from N-Space. As in the room where she had seen the Barone and his wife, tapestries and eastern rugs covered the walls and all the windows had glass in them, in small panes held in lead. Paintings of every sort of subject – religious themes, classical myths, family portraits – some of them that she recognized as still hanging on Mario's walls – in ornate frames more opulent than the pictures they held hung in rows as if they were in an exhibition.

As she ran down towards the next stairway, she heard voices ahead, raised in anger. To her horror, they were coming from an open door which she had no option but to pass if she were going to gain her objective. She stopped and inched her way towards the opening.

224

'I shall hear no more! As I owe a duty to my liege lord, you owed a duty to your father!'

A murmur of dissent. Sarah peeped cautiously round the doorpost. It was the same room and – oh God, it was. It was Guido and his father who were arguing.

'Be silent! Would you have me content that I have been dishonoured? You tell me we should own our land in freedom? I tell you that we were fortunate indeed that your mother and I were not turned from the door to beg the streets! I hold the land, the island, the estate in Cefalu in fealty to my Lord the King; and send my knights in love and duty to his Grace whenever he has need of them. And shall my son deny him?'

Sarah could see them standing near the fireplace with the small portrait of the younger Guido (of course, that was where she'd seen him before) in pride of place above it. If she crept past, on the other side of the gallery, she stood a good chance of getting by unseen.

'My Lord and father,' Guido was saying, 'I owe you my duty, under God. I owe none to the tyrants who oppress our land. I know not how to serve the one and not the other. In all humility, my lord, I ask your pardon for my transgression and beg for your forgiveness.'

The voices faded into the background as Sarah hurried down the gallery, telling herself that this all happened 225

nearly five hundred years ago. Or did it? Surely the Doctor was right to say that this was the only reality. Here. Now.

And this reminded her of the reason why she was running up the next flight of stairs.

The glow of light was becoming more steady now and growing to a shape not unlike the curve of an arch. Was the radiance which came from the mouth of the goblet merely a reflection? The potion itself looked to be aflame.

The giant form held the cup aloft for a long minute. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving as if in prayer.

When he opened his eyes once more and saw the arch of light complete before him, he gave a great shout of triumph and lowered the goblet to his lips.

But before he could drink, the door of the workshop crashed open. A wild-eyed figure with a shock of wind-blown white hair stood in the opening, his black robe whipping round his ankles. ‘No!’ he cried. ‘You shall not!’

and darted forward to dash the cup from the alchemist’s grasp.

With a cry of rage, Maximilian snatched at the empty air. The clink of the silver cup as it landed on the flagstones mingled with a hiss as of fire being doused. The fiery contents ran in a living stream from the goblet and vanished into the cracks between the stones.

226

Vilmius turned, his eyes blood-red. ‘You! I should have had you hanged! Nicodemus! Hold him!’

The Doctor was grabbed from behind by two immensely strong arms. He was evidently wrong about the powers of ghosts – at least the powers of a ghost in the service of an adept such as Maximilian Vilmius. There would be no escape from this grasp.

Maximilian was feverishly gathering together the ingredients of his potion. As he retrieved the silver cup he snarled, ‘You seek to stop me; but you are too late: The ritual is complete, the incorruptible tincture is distilled and time enough remains to compound the elixir once again before the clock doth strike the hour. Doctor you have failed!’

By the time Sarah reached the top of the tower, her legs were refusing to run any more. She struggled up the last turn of the stairs and almost fell into the clock chamber.

Gazing wildly around, she tried to get her bearings. On her left, she could see the back of the clock’s face with two duplicate hands – obviously used for altering its setting. For a shattering moment, she thought she was too late, for it seemed to read one minute past twelve. But then as it ticked a couple of seconds away –

227

Of course! It was back to front! It would go the wrong way round from this side. She was just in time.

But how to stop it? She had thought she would just be able to stop the pendulum from swinging; but this clock didn't t seem to have a pendulum. There were heavy loops of chain disappearing through a hole in the floorboards.

That must be where the weight was, she thought, desperately summoning up twenty-year-old memories of helping to wind up her great-uncle's old grandfather clock with the brass face. She certainly couldn't get at that.

On the right, a heavy brass hammer geared to a pegged wheel was poised to strike a large bell like a church bell.

What about a pad of cloth? But she had nothing thick enough,

The part of the pendulum seemed to be taken by a metal arm with what appeared to be two small cannonballs stuck on the ends. It was whirling round like an aeroplane propeller, except that it was going first one way and then the other as it was caught by a sort of jag-toothed wheel like a badly designed crown. If she tried to stop that she'd do herself a mischief Yet there seemed nothing else in the mechanism to stop.

Though her survey took only seconds, it was still too long. She only had seconds.

228

Taking a deep breath, she waited for the moment when the governor changed direction and grabbed hold of one of the cannonballs. For a moment she thought she'd done it, but then the weight took charge and it was wrenched from her hands.

Turning this way and that like the very mechanism he'd tried in vain to halt, not knowing where to go or what to do, she screamed in frustration, 'No! I won't let it happen!'

But even as the echo of her voice died away, the immense brass hammer began to move backwards in preparation for its strike. Midnight had come.

229

Nineteen

For a moment Sarah stood as if paralysed; then without even thinking, she leapt forward and seized the shank of the hammer in her arms, hugging it to her body, holding it back from striking the bell.

She felt it struggle to free itself as the trip mechanism reached the top again and pushed it backwards to activate the second chime. But with a rush of relief, she realized that the power of the clock only lifted it from the bell, releasing it at the top of the movement to fall on the bell by its own weight, rebounding to be caught once again by the lifting cam.

As long as she prevented it falling, it would not strike.

But had she succeeded in stopping Maximilian?

It appeared to be as Vilmius had said: there was no need to repeat the ritual. The archway of light still shimmered inches from the wall; indeed, it was if anything brighter yet.

The mixing of the draught now seemed to be nothing more than the following of a recipe; a pinch of this, a scruple of that, four drops of the other; all pounded together in a frenzy of concentrated rage.

At last the moment came when the tincture from the retort was added and the golden glow appeared in the goblet 230

once more. Maximilian turned to the Doctor, who was struggling in vain against the more than natural strength of his captor, and smiled triumphantly. He lifted the cup towards him, as if in a sarcastic toast, and made to drink.

But before the goblet touched his lips, Nicodemus cried out, ‘Master!’

Maximilian turned to follow his gaze. The upper half of the hourglass was empty; and the shining archway was beginning to fade….

‘The clock!’ he cried. ‘Why did it not strike? Casting aside all but the necessity for haste, he swigged his precious potion for all the world as if it were a tot of bar-room liquor.

For a moment it seemed that the result would be as unfortunate as his previous experiment on his faithful Nicodemus. He clutched at his throat and struggled to draw breath with the strangled gagging of a choking man. But then, as he drew a first deep thankful draught of air,

an aura of golden light surrounded him which seemed to ease his distress.

The radiance faded from him almost at once and he turned to the luminescent archway, now flickering uncertainly like a guttering candle.

With a shout of 'No!' he launched himself towards the light. He passed through it; the wall behind seemed to yield 231

to his body. But at the very moment of his plunge into the stonework, the glow disappeared completely.

A loud cry of agony and terror echoed round the workshop, cutting off abruptly as the trap snapped shut. All that could be seen of Maximilian Vilmius was the bulk of his right arm, sticking out of the wall, the fingers feebly twitching.

A moan came from Nicodemus. 'Master!' he called.

Relinquishing his hold on the Doctor, the friar floated across the room. As he approached it, he grew more and more transparent; and melted into the wall.

For a moment: the Doctor stared at the arm, which was now quite still. Then he turned and left the workshop. He closed the door behind him and quietly walked into the darkness.

'These scrambled eggs are undoubtedly the most delicious I've ever eaten,' said Sarah Jane, scraping up the last morsels and squidging them onto the last buttery scrap of toast. 'Why didn't you let me have them before?'

There was a generally festive air in the TARDIS now they were back in their own clothes and safely on the way to the twentieth century. True, it was tempered by a certain amount of sheepish guilt on both their parts that the puritan policy of non-intervention had been abandoned. But still, it 232

looked as if they'd managed between them to solve the problem they set out to solve, even if the Time Lords wouldn't have approved.

Guido's plan for their escape had worked impeccably.

Sarah in a servant's gown, complete with apron, and a kerchief to hide her short hair (all pinched from the sewing-room), marched out of the

busy gate minutes before a clean-shaven clerkly fellow in a black robe (the red surcoat being left, along with an unsavoury mess of second-hand whiskers, tucked under a pile of saddle-cloths). But it wasn't until they had located the TARDIS and closed the door behind them that Sarah could rid herself of the feeling that they were being followed.

'The eggs? Yes, they were good, weren't they?' said the Doctor, 'I'd forgotten I had them, to tell the truth. They're royal eggs in a sense. Came from the King's kitchen.'

He really was a bit of a snob, the Doctor. 'Don't you mean the Queen's?'

'No, no. The King of Wessex. Chap called Alfred.'

'King Alfred? The one who burnt the cakes?'

'Not while I was there. He had a cook: name of Ethelburg. A dab hand at bear rissoles, I remember.'

So the eggs were over a thousand years old. Uggh!

'Hardly fresh from the hen, then.'

'Mm? Couple of days at the outside. Don't forget there's no time in the TARDIS, so they're probably fresher than the ones you get from the supermarket.'

Here we go again! thought Sarah, She'd better get sorted out in her own mind exactly what had happened –

and what they could expect when they got back.

The Doctor picked up her plate, waving away her half-hearted attempts to say that no, she'd do it, and carried it off into the neighbouring kitchen-cum-lab-cum-workshop with the little sink that made curious swallowing noises when you let the water out.

As they had now sorted Max out, she thought, right at the beginning of his shenanigans, then presumably when they got back, it would turn out that none of what she remembered happening would in fact have happened (this time round, she thought – and then guiltily suppressed the thought, remembering what the Doctor had said about

there being only one present moment), So the Brigadier would have to have a different reason for being at his Uncle's house – if he was in fact there.

Of course, everything she remembered about her trips with the Doctor was still as valid as ever – and she thought about the N-space stuff and the visit to Louisa… And then she remembered Louisa; her romantic fantasies; her sweet personality; her horrible end.

234

'Do you know something, Doctor?' she said brightly, deliberately to shake off the feeling. 'I believe you're mentioned in that book of Ann Radcliffe's.'

'What book?' said the Doctor from the kitchen, with a background of clinking china.

'The one Jeremy found in the library. *The Mystery of the Castello*. Louisa said that there was a magician – she thought it was Merlin, and that could have been you once you'd given up the Father Christmas at Selfridges bit –

anyway, this good guy turned up in a pumpkin or a flash of lightning or something at the stroke of midnight….' Her voice trailed away as she heard what she was saying.

'Go on,' said the Doctor, appearing in the doorway with a tea-towel in his hand.

'…and walled the evil monk up alive,' she finished quietly.

'Why didn't you tell me this before?' he said. He sounded very serious.

'It never crossed my mind.'

'Mm. I see.' He disappeared into the kitchen.

What was he on about? It was a book, for Pete's sake.

She called out to him, 'It's only a story, after all.'

He didn't answer; so after a moment she struggled out of her deckchair and went to the doorway. He was standing with a plate in his hand, frozen in the act of drying it.

235

‘It’s only a story, Doctor.’

He looked at her, unseeing. Then he sighed and returned to his job.

‘Connections, Sarah. Connections. Only a story, yes.

But you told me yourself that it appeared to be based on the legend of the castello of San Stefano. And what are legends based on?’

He hung the cloth on a handy toolrack and turned to her.

‘If I was in the legend all the time,’ he said gravely,

‘then it appears we haven’t “changed the course of history”

after all, to use your vulgar phrase. We were already a part of it. And that means…’

He sighed and shook his head. ‘And that means that when we do get back, we’ll find as big a mess as ever.’

And this was the moment the TARDIS chose to trumpet her arrival.

It was Maggie who saw them coming, the advance guard from the *Princess M.* Stationed as she was as look-out on the tower on the eastern wall, she was able to spot them through a gap in the woods, so she scooted along the wall to the gate tower to warn the Brigadier of an impending attack.

He was now by himself. Having had further thoughts about the possible tactics of the enemy, he’d been discussing them, *faute de mieux*, with Jeremy (awake again, 236

and in reasonably good shape, if a trifle frayed around the edges) and discovered that his chances of a successful defence of the castello had effectively doubled.

‘You see,’ he had been saying, ‘the difficulty is this: While I’m at the top of the tower, where I can see what’s going on and keep the-main body of them at bay, this monk chappie could be floating through the walls anywhere at all.

And once inside, he could open the main gate and –’

‘– and Max has won the jolly old jackpot.’

‘Exactly. I really need to be down there in the middle of the bailey –

the open yard – to pop the fellow off wherever he turns up. But I can't be in two places at once.'

'Give me the stun-gun thingy, then, and I'll do it.'

'You?'

It was clear that Jeremy was deeply offended. 'I'll have you know, sir, that I'm a jolly good shot.'

Good grief, who'd have thought it? thought the Brigadier. Still, breeding will out.

'Been shooting with your Uncle Teddy, I suppose.'

'You mean pheasants and grouse and all the other assorted poultry they like to take a pot at? Well, no. Not a lot. Don't like the bang, you see. No, I was talking about fairground stuff Last time I went, I, won a plaster Venus de Whatnot, a silver jug – though I'd like to bet it wasn't real silver – and a pink teddy-bear; but I gave him to a little girl 237

in a push-chair, because bears aren't ever really pink, you know.'

'Are they not? Well, well, well. You learn something everyday.'

Jeremy looked surprised. 'No, sir. Usually black or brown or… Ah, you're joshing me, aren't you, sir? But I promise you, I hit the bull every time. I do, really I do.'

So not without some misgivings, the Brigadier had placed him in the most strategic spot (just south of the old broken pump), handed over the gun and returned to his vantage point to await events; and not so very long after that, Maggie came racing up the stairs to warn him that battle was about to commence.

However, the siege of the castello did not start with a full frontal attack. Max Vilmio arrived at the front gate like another hopeful tourist – or rather, the Brigadier thought to himself, like a tour guide, for he was leading a small group, headed by the monk. (He looked a bit solid to float through walls, but the Doctor must know.) The others were deployed round their leader like the thin-lipped men in suits who lurk round the US President when he is making an informal visit to a friendly neighbouring state.

'Good morning, Mr Vilmio,' called the Brigadier from the top of the gate tower before they even had time to knock on the door.

Half a dozen faces turned upwards. ‘I want to talk to the owner of this dump,’ said Max.

‘I’m afraid that’s not going to be possible,’ replied the Brigadier. You are not welcome here. Please be so kind as to leave at once.’

‘Where’s that Doctor? Let me talk to the Doctor.’

‘He’s not available at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?’

Vilmio’s face darkened. ‘Listen, creep. I’ve had about enough of your slimy Brit talk. You’ll save yourselves a lot of grief if you just open up.’

The Brigadier smiled. ‘Thank you for your warning.

May I reciprocate by strongly advising you not to try any strong-arm tactics, You might be surprised by the amount of

– ah – *grief* waiting for you.’

He spoke more truly than he realized himself While he had been talking, the two senior members of the defence force, Umberto and Mario, together with a sweating Elvis look-alike, having all deserted their posts apparently, had struggled up the narrow stairway carrying a steaming bucket each. As they came panting onto the top of the tower, Maggie, who had been keeping well back, gave a whoop of delight and rushed over to seize Umberto’s bucket.

To receive a faceful of very hot dishwater – not quite scalding, unfortunately, owing to the journey from the 239

kitchen – would disconcert the most determined attacker. It was to the credit of Max Vilmio’s bodyguard that in spite of the deluge (for Maggie’s bucketful was almost instantly joined by Roberto’s, and Mario’s was not far behind) all four had their guns out of their shoulder-holsters in a moment. The only one not to react at all was the figure in a monk’s habit, who didn’t even appear to be wet.

But no shot was fired, for Max had lifted a restraining hand. He spat out a mouthful of dirty water and looked up at Maggie, who was giggling with delight at the sight of the drenched party. ‘So that s where you got to, you little bitch,’

he said.

‘I know all about you, you dirty old man,’ she answered. ‘So why don’t you bug off?’

‘Good advice, Mr Vilmio,’ said the Brigadier, who had been watching the antics of his insubordinates subordinates with immense satisfaction. ‘Si,’ added Mano. ‘Go paddle your own canoodle.’

‘Okay, we’ll play it your way,’ said Vilmio, who had shown no great surprise to be told that his cover had been blown.

With a jerk of his head, he ordered a tactic retreat.

Keeping their guns in their hands, his party went back the way they had come, keeping an eye on the row of grinning 240

faces at the top of the gate tower, and vanished round the corner by the orange grove.

A shout from behind brought the Brigadier’s head round. ‘I say, you lot. What’s going on?’

Jeremy, in an old straw hat with an enormous brim which Umberto had dug out for him, was wandering towards them from the middle of the open space, like a peripatetic mushroom.

The Brigadier was across to the other side of the tower in a flash. This was no time for Jeremy to be joining the others in abandoning his post.

‘Stay where you are!’ he shouted. ‘You’re going to be needed at any moment!’

And indeed, he was immediately summoned back to the front of the tower by a call from Roberto. ‘Lookee-here, boss man,’ he cried, ‘the monk guy’s doing the hokey-cokey!’

The Brigadier pushed his way through the little knot of excited onlookers. In the wood opposite the orange grove, the figure of the monk – what had Maggie called him? Nico, wasn’t it? – was dodging through the trees from clump to clump, obviously trying not to be seen. His motion was distinctly strange. It was almost, the Brigadier thought, as if he were floating four inches above the ground; and this 241

wasn't surprising, he thought a moment later, because that was exactly what he was doing.

He came to the end of the wood; after a moment of hesitation behind the last tree, he suddenly swooped out of his cover and floated up in the air, like a levitating saint in a religious painting, and took off towards the castle, disappearing round the comer.

For Pete's sake, the Brigadier thought, he's not even coming through the wall. He's coming over it.

'Stand by, Jeremy!' he called to the unknown quantity down in the yard nervously clutching the castello's last defence, 'He's coming in from the east. Ten o'clock high!'

'Which is the east?' squeaked Jeremy, frantically trying to look in all the directions of the compass simultaneously.

'To your left, man. To your left. Up in the sky!'

Jeremy swung round to his left and raised the stun-gun.

Suddenly the monk was there, up above the eastern wall, diving down towards the lonely figure by the pump like an ecclesiastic Superman.

The attack on the castello had begun.

Nineteen

242

'He's coming in from the east. Ten o'clock high!'

People! How on earth could he be expected to know where the east was? thought Jeremy, looking all round for any sort of flying object.

'Which is the east?'

The answer didn't help all that much; he'd never been absolutely certain about left and right, either. He made a quick surreptitious scan (Nanny used to get so cross!) for the mole which was his private clue. Yes, there it was, just below the finger where he'd wear a wedding ring if he was a girl, so that must be left.

He swung round that way and raised the gun in shaking hands; and at once saw his target. As he squinted down the barrel at the figure hurtling towards him, all of a sudden he stopped shaking. This was no

more difficult than knocking down one of those naff-looking wooden ducks that they had on the firing ranges at the fair.

He waited until he was quite sure he had the monk firmly in the sights and pulled the trigger, keeping it squeezed as if it were a machine gun.

The effect was surprising. It was as if the monk had been hit by a blast from an instant hurricane. He was stopped in his headlong flight in a few yards, fighting to regain the Impetus he had lost, but was immediately swept 243

away up into the sky, tumbling and turning like an autumn leaf caught up in the swirl of an October gale.

As Jeremy let go the trigger, he became aware of a funny sort of noise coming from his right; then he realized it was the little crowd on top of the gate tower, shouting and clapping. Who are they cheering? he thought; and then realized with a buzz of delight which he'd never experienced before that they were cheering him!

Whipping off his toadstool hat, he swept it round in a great big sort of a bow like a – well, you know – one of those chappies with a feather m his hat and a sword and all.

As he rose with his arms outstretched to take his applause in the circus way, he became aware that his audience had stopped cheering and were frantically shouting and waving towards the sky….

Oh, God. Yes, he was coming in again, only this time he wasn't flying straight; he was swerving and swooping from side to side.

Jeremy dropped his hat, seized the gun in both hands again and tried to aim it, but the wretched fellow never stayed in one place long enough. It was just impossible; and Jeremy began to shake all over again.

But then the miracle happened once more. Of course! It wasn't a question of a steady aim this time; this was like the snaps hooting film thingies where baddies kept popping up 244

from behind rocks and you had to try and knock off as many as possible with your six-shooter.

Even while he was thinking this, he'd relaxed; with the gun held loosely in his right hand he let off a series of pot shots at the jinking,

jerking, diddle-daddling target. With every shot he scored a bull's-eye; and Nico the monk was blown all atwist and atwizzle further into the sky each time, until he dropped down vertically from something like a thousand feet and disappeared into the woods behind the wall.

If he'd been a success before, he was now an instant star. His fans went mad, screaming and laughing and slapping each other on the back. Even the Brigadier was applauding.

Blasé with all this adulation, he raised a cool hand in acknowledgement and strolled over to get his hat.

'I said it would blow him away,' said the Doctor's voice.

Being full of ancient scrambled eggs, Sarah didn't join the others in the scratch meal which Umberto and Maggie cobbled together for the garrison, a puritan affair of chunks of bread and lumps of mozzarella cheese in the hand, with the odd tomato on the side, eaten on the hoof while keeping a strict lookout. But she listened enthralled to the epic saga 245

of *The Triumphs of Jeremy* as expounded by the hero himself, modestly leaning on the battlements of the gate tower, stun-gun at the ready in case of a full frontal attack.

(For the Brigadier was convinced that after such a definitive defeat, the ghost ploy would not be used again.) But even while she enthused and congratulated, half an eye stayed on the Doctor and the Brigadier, marching slowly up and down on the other side of the tower, deep in some sort of council of war.

The Doctor had taken the news that Max was still very much in evidence fairly philosophically, though he seemed to find the situation more serious than ever.

The odd phrase drifted across: '…midnight, it seems';

'…the flight of the dragon'; '…the last resort'. At one point the Brigadier was obviously in vigorous opposition to the Doctor's suggestions, Sarah noticed; at another, the Doctor seemed to be quite angry with the Brig. But eventually they seemed to reach an amicable consensus.

'…so I thought I might sort of take it up, you know,' the champion sharpshooter was saying in a sort of bored drawl.

‘After all, a talent like mine shouldn’t be allowed to –’

‘Excuse me,’ said Sarah and shot off after the Doctor who had beckoned her to follow him and disappeared down the stairs.

246

‘Good luck, Miss Smith – ah – Sarah,’ said the Brigadier as she rushed past him.

Good luck? Now what? And where did the Doctor get off, expecting her to run after him like a pet dog?

Realizing that she was in fact running after him, she slowed down to a sort of casual trot and caught up with him as he strode back towards the keep (the TARDIS had landed back in the rear courtyard). She was all ready to say something pretty devastating about the way he patronized her; if she could think of anything.

But as she drew alongside, he turned to her and said,

‘Good. Good. I need your help, Sarah. The whole fate of the world could depend on you.’

Ah. Now that was different. A turn for the better.

Perhaps he was beginning to realize that… Eh? What did he say?

She stopped in her tracks. ‘The fate of the world?’

‘I’ll explain in the TARDIS. Now do come along.’

And there she was running after him again. Damn!

‘But she made me promise not to tell anybody!’

Even as she said it, Sarah realized how childish it sounded. She looked at the Doctor’s grim face and saw that from his point of view, she was an irresponsible twit. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘But you do see that if she’s going to trust 247

me, she mustn’t think I go running round telling her secrets to all and sundry.’

For this was the plan: as it was clear that the ghost of the castello, the white lady, must somehow be linked with the release of Maximilian from the wall – after all, as the Doctor pointed out, there was no other

era pin-pointed by the psycho-probe – and as they were both convinced that Louisa was the white lady herself, then the best way forward was for Sarah to capitalize on their relationship and persuade Louisa to change her course of action –

'To change the course of history? Sarah had said drily when the Doctor reached this point in his explanation.

'We've gone too far already to back out now,' he said.

'Our intervention before is a matter of history itself, as you pointed out. As it went wrong, we have no other option.'

It was then that Sarah told him of Louisa's conviction that there was buried treasure to be found – and of her intention to get her boyfriend to break into the wall to find it; and it was then that the Doctor exploded with rage.

It took a deal of chatting to placate him; and it wasn't until he said in an Oscarish sort of voice that he was

'seldom all and never in any circumstances sundry' that she felt she'd won him over.

'At least we know what you're aiming at,' he said. 'All you have to do is to find out when she is intending to take this foolhardy action – and persuade her not to.'

All! But even as Sarah had qualms about her chances, she felt a curious lifting of her heart. For wasn't this precisely what she'd wanted?

She was being given an opportunity to prevent Louisa's terrible end.

Jeremy really got quite bored waiting for things to start again. Hours it was. Hours and hours. After all, to a man of action the only worthwhile thing was the prospect of a spot of the old one-two, as Thumper, the PT instructor at school, used to call any sort of fight.

He turned away from the image of himself cowering in the corner of the ring with his gloved hands covering his face while his opponent beat him about the head to the jeers of his schoolfellows and cries of 'You've got him now, boy, kill the bastard!' from Thumper; and firmly substituted the more gratifying one of recent times. He hefted the stun

gun in his hand and imagined Max backing away from him, begging for mercy.

'For God's sake, Jeremy, point that thing somewhere else!' snapped the Brigadier, turning from a survey of the terrain outside the walls. 'Didn't Teddy teach you 249

anything?' He clicked the brass telescope closed and came over, holding out his hand. 'If you want to be useful,' he said, removing the gun, 'go and take a message to the other posts. Say that I'm of the opinion that we can expect another attempt at any moment. For a while there was a lot of coming and going on the boat. Bit difficult to make out, but it's stopped now. Things are too quiet for my liking, and it'll be getting dark soon, so tell everybody to keep on the alert. Got it?'

Jeremy trailed down the first flight of stairs onto the top of the wall, keeping down below the parapet. Dogsbody again. After all that he'd done!

'But won't they wonder where we've been all this time?'

Dressed in her high-waisted muslin once more she was doing her not very successful best to coax her shortened page-boy bob into the curly-top confection Louisa had produced. A box of assorted pieces of plastic tubing she'd found in the kitchen-lab – for use as improvised curlers –

and a basin of boiling water hardly constituted the most sophisticated of hairdressing equipment.

The Doctor was at the control console, adjusting various large knobs and taking careful note of the readings which resulted. 'That's just what I'm trying to sort out now,' he 250

said in answer to her question. 'You see, it takes a great deal of energy to arrive back somewhere soon after you left. The nearer you are, the more you start to activate Blinovitch.'

'Ah yes. Good old Aaron,' she said, winding a likely lock round a bit of an old-fashioned wireless set.

He looked at her in some surprise. 'I didn't explain the Blinovitch limitation effect, did I?'

'No. But I've got a feeling you're going to,' she said bitterly as the hair slipped off yet again.

‘Certainly,’ he said. ‘One of these days. First things first. We’re not here to have fun, Sarah.’

Fun!

‘As you’ll remember,’ he went on, continuing his work,

‘the TARDIS energy banks were totally drained by the beacon of the Exxilon City –’

Sarah shuddered as she remembered their escape from the Daleks; and another curler slipped from its moorings.

‘– and although she was able to generate enough temporal thrust to take us home, she’s by no means back to normal, poor old thing. Still, from the readings I’m getting, it looks as if we’ll arrive back in 1818 less than an hour after we left. They probably won’t have even missed us.

‘You’re not very good at that, are you?’ he added dispassionately, as one of the tubes slid right out of its hopeful curl and landed on the floor.

251

Sarah tried not to scream at him. ‘Look, mate, unless I get something sorted, the whole plan will go for a burton.

With my hair up I look like a startled hedgehog. You think Louisa won’t sus out that we’re up to something? Why should I go for a walk in the woods and cut all my curls off?’

The Doctor gazed at her for a moment, turned and walked out of the control room.

Now she really had blown it, she thought gloomily, pushing a lank wet hank of hair out of her eyes. She’d never get invited into the TARDIS again.

Almost at once he was back. He dumped a largish box made of heavy shiny cardboard in front of her: It had a label on it with the legend, in neat faded copperplate: *Sarah, Her Hair.*

Unbelievingly, she opened it, releasing a strong odour of mothballs into the TARDIS. It was full of wigs, fringes, falls, the lot. She picked up a bunch of curls of a tolerably good match to her own hair and

plonked them on top of her head; perfect.

‘Sarah who?’ she asked. ‘Bernhardt?’ She might as well give him the chance to do a bit more name dropping.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Sarah Siddons. Does it matter?’

252

They did not have long to wait for the second attack in the battle of the castello. Almost as soon as Jeremy had arrived back to report that the warning had been given, the Brigadier heard a yell from Maggie, who was sharing the left-hand tower with Umberto.

Moving swiftly to the front left corner of the gatehouse, which gave a view of the whole wall between the two towers, he saw that a man had emerged from the woods carrying a ladder.

Good girl, he thought, as he saw Maggie coming down from the tower onto the top of the wall ready to receive them. But even as he heard another shout – ‘Ladder, man, ladder!’ – from the other side, the staccato burst of automatic gunfire made him duck down below the parapet.

This was not what he’d expected at all. If his neophyte troops had really taken in their hasty training, a simple attack via ordinary ladders had very little hope of success –

unless there were scores of them, and he doubted whether the size of the attacking force would allow for that. A man climbing a long ladder was in no position to fire any sort of weapon, so his ascent would have to be covered by fire from below.

But when he neared the top – at the very moment he was most vulnerable to a well-judged push (sideways, as he’d taught his mixed bag of trainees, not backwards) – his 253

confederates on the ground would have to stop firing; they couldn’t take the risk of hitting their own man.

He ran to the back of the tower to assess the total situation. It was clear that an attempt was being made on all four walls. He could see Roberto lurking ready, and Mario skipping unsteadily down from the other side of the west tower. Umberto was already in position – and yes, Maggie was tensing herself for the first push.

By now the sound of firing was continuous, and coming from all sides. He ran back to the front and using an embrasure on the left side of the battlements – the east – for its true purpose for the first time for many a long year, he was able from its cover to espy in the shadows of the woods the flashes of the rifles of those firing up at Maggie's wall.

There were two of them; even though they'd taken cover, he could see the shapes of their bodies.

Lifting the stun-gun, he took careful aim at the nearer one of the two and fired. To his surprise, both guns abruptly stopped firing. It was as if he had indeed killed his two birds with one stone.

Even as he ran to the west side to try his luck there, he heard Maggie's shout of triumph as she toppled her assailant. Almost tripping over the crouching figure of Jeremy, who seemed to have found something of

extraordinary interest in one of the cracks between the paving stones, he placed himself in his firing position.

This time, he was not only able – with one shot – to immobilize the two who were firing up at Roberto from the shelter of the orange grove, but also, apparently, the attackers further off whose target must have been Mario.

Now all the guns had been stopped bar those in the distance behind him, where Umberto was stationed.

Down the steps; along the top of the wall past the victorious Maggie at a rush; two at a time up the stairs to the summit of the east tower. He could see Umberto on the farther wall; he seemed to be belabouring the unlucky fellow at the top of his ladder with a rolling pin.

As the Brigadier had predicted, his comrades on the ground had stopped firing now, but he could still see them quite clearly, crouching in the undergrowth, guns at the ready. It was a simple matter to deal with them as effectively as the others.

This time he was near enough to appreciate the full effect of the stun-gun: the impact of the charge flung them to the ground, where they lay spreadeagled; and he knew from his previous experience of the guns that they would lie there unconscious for something like twenty-four hours.

A movement caught his eye. Some way behind the two recumbent bodies a giant figure stood, almost invisible in the shadows.

It could only be Max. Here was an opportunity to finish the whole thing for good and all. The Brigadier raised the gun and lined up the sights on the very centre of the dark shape.

'Brigadier!'

It was Maggie who was shrieking at him. He followed the direction of her frantically flapping hand.

As soon as he turned he realized the extent of his mistake. He should have known at once. The attack on the walls had only been a diversion.

Even as the thought flashed through his mind, he was raising the gun to blow away the flying figure of the monk, who had approached unnoticed from the supposedly unassailable north side of the castle.

But he was too late. Before he had time to pull the trigger, Nico was in the shelter of the gatehouse, safe behind the three-foot-thick stone wall.

Already, the Brigadier could hear the great beam which held the gate being lifted from its cradle by the preternatural strength of the ghost.

Max Vilmio had won the battle.

Twenty

The Brigadier had heard many a loud and frightening noise in his varied and active life. Probably the worst had been very near its beginning when, as a small boy in the public shelter in the middle of Eaton Square during the 1940 blitz on London, he had been woken by an explosion and a rumbling crash which felt as if the world was being tom apart; and had emerged with his mother the next morning to find that their home was nothing but a pile of rubble.

But even this noise was nothing but a squib compared with the noise which now brought his head whipping round towards the rear of the castle. A thunder-crack and a boom which shook the thick stone wall on which he stood as if it were lath and plaster; a whinnying shriek which at the same time was deeper than the roar of many lions; the

impact of a gargantuan body landing on the trembling earth; all heralded the arrival of the largest and most fearsome of the fiends he had as yet beheld.

Covered in a flickering glow like flame, in form it was not unlike a horse, some thirty feet high at the shoulder –

ninety hands, an insane voice gabbled in the Brigadier's mind – with flailing hooves the size of a dustbin lid. But its face, with one wild eye flaring scarlet in the middle of its brow, and the savage tearing teeth of a carnivore in a jaw as 257

long as a man's body, was very far from those of the gentle creatures the Brigadier had so often known as friends.

As the sound of its cry echoed round the walls of the castello, the Brigadier heard another noise: the gate balk dropping back into its place, as a shriek of terror came from the gatehouse.

Again the creature sounded its fearful call and leaped forward in a spring which took it half-way down the bailey yard. Another leap and its head dived into the gate-house.

Nico's shrieks filled the air as the great beast pulled him from his useless sanctuary. Tossing him up high, like a killer whale playing with a baby seal, it caught him again in the clamp of its jaws and briefly chewed before tossing him up again to be caught and swallowed like a mackerel from a zoo-keeper's bucket.

The screams had stopped and all was quiet, but for Jeremy's sobs of fear coming from the gate-house roof and Maggie's delighted giggling.

To the Brigadier's horror, her face was alight with pleasure.

'D'you see that, Alistair?' she called up. 'D'you ever see anything so nifty? Real neat!'

She walked towards the edge of the wall and held out her hand towards the great muscular creature, which was standing with its head down, licking the blood from its 258

teeth, the tongues of fire which delineated its body barely showing now.

Even in such a moment, the Brigadier's trained mind was at work. How could a ghost have blood? he thought.

And yet he had appeared to have flesh, which could be as solid as his own if need be, so why not blood? He lifted the stun-gun. There was always a hope that it might have some effect.

'Come here, lover,' said. Maggie softly. 'There's my boy; there's my beautiful boy.'

The fiend looked up at her with its staring red eye. It tossed its head; pawed the ground; and ambled over. It stretched out its neck, its foot-long teeth inches from her proffered hand.

'Maggie! For God's sake!' called out the Brigadier in urgent warning, lowering the gun.

She ignored him. Making croodling noises like a new mother with her baby at her breast – or like a woman wordless with desire offering herself to her paramour, she reached out as if to stroke the ghastly head.

But before her fingers could make contact, the glow which surrounded the monumental body leaped into flame again and seemed to melt it in a fiery blaze.

Still she did not draw away. She let her hand fall to her side and stood with her head thrown right back, her heavy lips apart, taking deep shuddering breaths.

As the Brigadier watched, quite unable to move, the liquid flame flowed into Maggie's body, filling her, burning her up, consuming her with heatless fire; whilst she was moaning and sighing and murmuring incomprehensible words; and as she became enwrapped in a sheath of incandescence of a brilliance which hurt the eye, she uttered a cry of ultimate satisfaction that was almost like a sob.

The shining died. But as Maggie turned and looked up at the Brigadier, her face heavy with satiated lust, he saw her eyes had now become two pools of scarlet flame.

Sarah looked out of the window of Louisa's bedroom at the garden two floors below. By the light of the three-quarter moon shining through the streaking clouds, she could see that the statue of Venus was still there after all these years, though the garden itself had been completely changed from a formal pattern of rectangular walks and flowerbeds, to a romantic dell of lawns and hedges, pergolas and

pools.

In the middle of the left wall was the arch where she had been leaning while Guido told his tale. She listened to the tower clock striking eleven and remembered her frantic 260

rush to try to stop it. It was difficult to believe that it was only yesterday that it had all happened.

I wonder if his father's thrown him out, she thought; and had to hold on to the windowsill as the dizziness of the years caught up with her: Guido had been dead for over three centuries. This time-travelling lark was more disorienting than flying half-way round the world, she thought; and it played havoc with your emotions. She took a deep breath to steady herself and tried to concentrate on what Louisa was saying.

'I do declare, dear Sarah, the woods and fields are all so pretty in the springtime of the year, I'd happily forgo the gentle life and be a milkmaid – if they would but wash the cows. And goats are even worse – they like to smell, I'll warrant.'

Louisa, who was sitting at her looking-glass trying on a succession of caps, peeped archly at her companion and continued, 'Indeed, I know they do – for Giuseppe told me that just as you or I might sprinkle lavender water on our hair billy-goats make pi-pi on their beards!' And she went off into peals of hiccupping laughter, until she was fighting to get her breath.

Sarah had been beginning to think that the conversation would never come round to the subject in hand – and this prattling, giggling, all-girls-together type chat had never 261

been her scene. So with a token titter she eagerly seized on this reference to the beloved.

'When am I going to meet your lovely Giuseppe?' she asked in what she hoped was the right sort of girly tone.

The TARDIS had delivered them far later than would have been convenient. It was already dark and starting to blow. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon and the Barone was thinking of sending out a search party.

The Doctor had to come up with an elaborate story about having intended to walk through the woods to the little fishing hamlet on the

north-west coast of the island –

and taking a wrong turning by following a brook – and so on and so on; a story which made him look very foolish.

Sarah could see how much he hated it.

Paolo Verconti had held back his supper for the Doctor and there was really no excuse not to join him at once, leaving the girls to escape to their boudoir at the back of the house and a delicate tray of little meat patties, fairy cakes and a jug of elderflower cordial. Better than a kick in the breadbasket from a blind horse, Sarah had decided surreally, pushing away from her mind the phantom taste of a large G-and-T, followed by a pepperoni pizza – or a bucketful of Chicago spare ribs washed down with real Czech pilsener beer.

262

'Giuseppe?' Louisa now said in answer to her question.

'Why certainly, you must not leave the island until you have made his acquaintance. Now tell me, Sarah dearest' – she was clearly changing the subject – 'for you must know that I have come to value your opinion beyond anything – which do you think the more becoming? This lace cap with the pink ribbon? Or should I be plain as a quaker in the linen?'

Anything less quaker-like than the butterfly-wing scrap in her left hand could hardly be imagined.

Sarah laughed and pointed to the plain one. 'I'm sure your beau won't even notice what you're wearing,' she said.

Louisa, a little pinker as she pinned the cap onto her curls, primly pursed her lips and said, 'To be sure, I have no notion what you mean.' But then, unable to contain herself, she swung round on her stool and seized Sarah's hand, 'Oh Sarah Jane, if you but knew the things he says to me – and when he sings, my heart is singing too, singing the song the angels sing in Heaven! The day that Powly grants us his consent, I shall die of rapture, surely. Do you think he will say yes, dearest Sarah? For if he does not, I know that I shall die of grief!'

Sarah laughed. 'Then either way you'll die, so it doesn't really matter, does it?'

Louisa pulled back her hand, and looked down.

Sarah gently took the hand back. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tease you. When the Barone sees how much you love him, how could he refuse?’

Louisa’s eyes were shining now, and her half-open lips were trembling slightly.

For a moment, Sarah had a pang of conscience. Here was this child flirting dangerously with a lusty young peasant boy and she was egging her on. But then she remembered that she was in fact trying to save her from a far worse fate.

‘In any case, he’s bound to like Giuseppe when he knows that he’s found the treasure; and then he’ll make him his heir and all. Isn’t that right?’ she said; adding disingenuously, ‘When is Giuseppe going to try to find it, then?’

Again Louisa retrieved her hand. ‘Oh, pretty soon, I dare say.’ She rose and walked over to her writing table in the comer. ‘Please excuse me, dearest Sarah. I have forgot to write a letter – a note of no great importance, but one that must be done.’

Sarah shrugged and turned away, picking up the copy of *The Mystery of the Castello* which was lying by the bed.

There was no great hurry to find out. Her job was to make sure of the facts without frightening Louisa off, while the 264

Doctor discreetly pumped the Barone for more information on the castello legend.

But the Doctor had been very insistent that their motto should be ‘softly softly catchee monkey’. The worst thing they could do would be to go off at half-cock, he said.

(Sarah had an immediate picture of a poor shivering organ-grinder’s monkey wearing a red fez, with a large cowboy’s revolver pointing at him.) The Doctor had explained that even if they had to stay in 1818 for days, even weeks, the TARDIS would still take them back to the Brigadier shortly after they left him, just as it had brought them back here, albeit a little later than they’d intended.

As she sat down where the candle would light the page, she caught sight of a small portrait, a miniature hanging on the wall. She very

nearly laughed out loud, for although it depicted a female of about thirty, it bore a strong resemblance to the Brigadier's ninety-two-year-old Uncle Mario. Here was the little pointed face, the elfish grin, the twinkling eyes – even the shock of unruly hair, reluctantly tamed by the fashion of the day.

'Who's that?' she asked.

Louisa looked up. 'That? Oh, that's my lovely Grinley,'

she said and returned to her writing.

265

Sarah smiled to herself. It was clear that whatever else happened there was no danger of the Barone dying childless.

'A dedicated bachelor such as myself has far more time for such pursuits,' said Paolo Verconti, recently rendered even more plump by the ingestion of half a fish pie, a quantity of beef ragout, two small guinea fowl and most of a stuffed sheep's paunch.

The Doctor, who had confined himself to a few lamb chops, nodded in understanding. 'I have been something of a dabbler in matters philosophical myself; the natural and physical sciences, you understand. It is only lately that I have found myself investigating curious reports of hauntings and such.'

His host, who had been picking his teeth with a silver toothpick, discreetly inspected what had resulted from his delving before returning the indeterminate morsel to his mouth. He gave an almost inaudible burp, replenished his empty glass with Marsala and pushed the bottle towards the Doctor.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, topping up his own glass, from which approximately half an inch had been drunk. 'I should be grateful if you could expand a little on your account of the legends connected with your remarkable 266

ancestral home. For example, I'm right in thinking, am I not, that there is nothing heard of a white lady – a ghost –

haunting the environs of the castello?'

'Quite right, quite right,' said the Barone.

The Doctor took a sip of wine. ‘Or a dragon?’

‘My dear Doctor, I think it is well established that dragons died out in this part of the world thousands of years ago, long before the castle was built. I have seen a stuffed dragon – a small one, you comprehend – brought back from China by a Captain of my acquaintance, a Dutchman; and the same man, a man I would trust with my life – and indeed I did entrust him with my purse, for he multiplied my stake in his venture some five hundred per centum –

what was I saying?’

‘Dragons,’ said the Doctor, with very little hope in his voice.

‘To be sure, dragons. This same good man told me with many an oath that he had seen a living dragon with his own eyes – in the East Indies, I do believe. Though he was in drink at the time. In the telling of it, that is; and probably in the seeing too.’ The Barone knocked back his glass and refilled it. ‘But that’s neither here nor there. I am no dragon fancier, sir. Nor a lover of ghosts.’

He offered the bottle to the Doctor, who declined it with a smile.

‘For my part, I have a devotion to La Santa Stella,’ said the Barone, a little thickly.

‘I – I don’t think I have ever heard of a Saint Stella,’

said the Doctor carefully.

‘The stars, Doctor, the stars. Those mysterious orbs which in their flight proclaim how dwarfish is this lowly creature peering up at them from the mud.’

He leant forward in a conspiratorial way. ‘You are a connoisseur of wonders, I collect. If the weather holds, I shall show you a wonder this very night. A wonder not beheld by man for a century and a half. And more.’

A faint rumble of thunder.

‘If the weather holds,’ he said and openly belched.

Louisa finished writing her note so quickly that it was hardly worth while picking up the Ann Radcliffe book.

Sarah just had time to check out that, as she half remembered, there was no mention of the long lost son's return from the wars. As she came up to Louisa's room, she had seen Guido's portrait, looking exactly the same as three hundred years before (though a touch browner in colour), now hanging in the gallery with the other paintings. But there seemed to be no clue anywhere as to what had happened to him. She let the book drop and closed her eyes, 268

the better to remember what his father had been saying the last time she saw him.

'La! It is so hot. I'll warrant there'll be thunder before the night is through.'

Louisa's voice startled her; she realized that she had been on the point of dropping off.

'I believe I shall go outside to discover if the air is fresher in the garden,' Louisa continued casually – but quite incapable of keeping the underlying excitement from her voice.

'I think it's going to teem with rain.'

'That will not signify; I shall be all the cooler.'

'I'll come too,' said Sarah.

'No, no,' replied Louisa, a little too quickly. 'You must go to bed and rest your arm.'

Okay, she'd got the message. There was a lovers' tryst in the offing.

'You're quite right,' she said. 'I do feel a bit tired.'

Ripping knackered, more like, though her arm hardly hurt at all now – after all, as far as she was concerned it got bashed getting on for two or three days ago; or was it four? It was hard to work out when you tried to count the time in the TARDIS. But it certainly would have been great to get her head down.

269

However, when duty called… And duty was telling her very firmly that while the lovers were busy trysting, she must be behind the hedge on surveillance, to see what she could pick up about the plans for digging the non-existent treasure out of the wall.

She'd let Louisa get ahead a bit and then follow. If it was a bit Nosy-Parkerish or even Peeping-Tornish (though she was convinced that the two kids were absolutely innocent; so far, at any rate), well, it was all in a good cause.

'Goodnight then, dearest Sarah Jane. Sleep well. I trust your shoulder will be quite healed by morning.'

Turning firmly back to her book, Sarah threw an abstracted 'Sure. Thanks. See you later,' over her shoulder and listened for the click of the door as Louisa left.

But she heard more than a click. She heard the key being turned in the lock.

She leapt to her feet and tried the door. But it was true.

Louisa had locked her in; and there could be only one reason for her to do a thing like that.

Tonight was the night it was all going to happen.

Twenty-One

After the fiend had gone, there was utter silence in the castle. The Brigadier took a quick look round. There was nobody to be seen. The tiny garrison had done its best to hide and nobody would take the risk of calling attention to himself Even Jeremy's sobs had died.

The Brigadier's attention was brought back to the immediate situation by a shout from Maggie. 'Come back, you lily-livered skunk!'

Certainly, when he looked, it seemed to the Brigadier too that Max, who had come out from the cover of the woods, was running away. His retreat was covered by the two remaining henchmen, both with the automatic rifles the others had carried.

But then, out of the stillness came the sound that the Brigadier had been dreading to hear: the hammer-throb of a helicopter.

It was approaching from the south. He could see its lights in the twilight. Of course, he thought. Max was no one's fool. Once he had seen that the original plan might fail, he'd radioed to the mainland for backup.

The chopper was coming in to land on the stony field just below the orange grove. Already the small herd of goats 271

which browsed on the scanty vegetation was scattering, to a chorus of terrified bleats.

When Maggie saw that Max was about to disappear into the shelter of the orange trees, she raised her hand and pointed it in his direction. To the consternation of the Brigadier, he saw emerging from her fingertips a flash of light – a tongue of energy – no, a bolt of fire, like those emitted by the little dog-like fiend but far stronger and thicker in appearance; and judging by the effect of its impact, far more powerful too. For the first orange tree at the corner of the grove which took the brunt of the attack burst into violent flame and then was gone, vaporized by the intensity of the heat, leaving nothing but a smoking stump.

Whether Max had also been hit was impossible to say.

He was no longer to be seen, certainly.

The two bodyguards, hampered in their flight by the necessity for keeping an eye to the rear, were still in plain view. When the orange tree exploded, they swung round with their guns at the ready; seeing Maggie on top of the wall unleashing another bolt towards the grove, they opened fire.

Almost at once, she fell to the ground, knocked backwards by the force of the round which had hit her in the shoulder. But with a cry of rage, she scrambled up, ran in a crouch to the battlement and let fly again.

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Human flesh was evidently as vulnerable to the power of her attack as living wood; momentarily screaming as they flared up like petrol-soaked torches, they were silent in an instant as they were vaporized, leaving nothing to show that they had ever stood there but a wisp of blue smoke and the twisted remains of their half-melted guns.

Great Heavens, thought the Brigadier, that thing inside her gives her more firepower than a tank; thank the Lord it was aimed at their enemies, rather than themselves.

As the thought crossed his mind, he saw down the hill the giant figure of Max emerging from the far edge of the orange grove and running

for the helicopter, which was waiting for him in the middle of the field.

Maggie had seen him too, for she raised her arm as if she was going to fire at him. But she must have decided that he was too far away. She stood up, clambered into the embrasure of the battlements through which she had been firing, and jumped off the wall.

The Brigadier ran to the front of the tower, expecting to see her body lying limp on the ground. But no; she had landed lightly on her toes and was starting to move away in the direction taken by her former protector.

But she'd left it too late. Already the helicopter was rising into the darkening sky. She stopped; and the 273

Brigadier could see her watching as it cleared the trees and flew towards the castello.

Almost lazily lifting her arm, she aimed at the machine.

'So long, Daddy-o,' she said, and let fly.

But she missed.

Or so it seemed for the moment, for the chopper did not burst into flame as the Brigadier expected. But she must have caught an arm of the rotor. The helicopter slipped sideways and tumbled out of the sky like a shot pheasant.

Landing with a screeching cacophony of tortured machinery, it somersaulted a couple of times and came to a stop, a smoking wreck, some thirty yards from the castle wall. In the silence a thin cheer arose from the castle walls from the watching defenders, who seemed to have regained a modicum of courage as the battle turned in their favour.

The Brigadier didn't join in; but he was just as chuffed, he decided. Surely nothing could survive such a crash. Max must be dead at last.

But no. Rising from the wreckage, the giant figure stepped to the ground as if he were a gentleman of old alighting from his carriage. Seeing Maggie raising her aim again, he lifted his chin and arrogantly awaited her attack, like a duellist who has expended both his bullets and awaits his inevitable end.

But when she fired, the effect was very different from the earlier attacks. The bolt of fire hit Max full in the chest; but he did not fall or burst into flame. He staggered slightly with the sheer force of the impact, but the energy seemed to be sucked into him, vanishing into his body.

Good grief, thought the Brigadier. Here we go again: an invulnerable enemy. He even looks larger than he did a moment ago!

But worse was to come.

Opening both arms towards Maggie, as though he were offering to embrace her, he called in a loud voice, 'In the name of Astaroth; in the name of Beelzebub; in the name and might of Lucifer: I command thee to come to me!'

Closing his eyes, he started to mutter in a tone too low for the Brigadier to catch what he was saying, though the occasional word sounded like Latin.

Maggie was standing as if mesmerized. Her head was thrown back as it had been when her incubus had first entered her, but there was no ecstasy; rather was she consumed with grief. Her face was pale, her mouth tight shut, as though to hold her sorrow to herself; a tear glinted from one cheek.

A serpentine flame extended from her towards the waiting Vilmio, weaving from side to side like a cobra tasting the air with its tongue. It reached his body and 275

steadied; and with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, the fiend passed from her body into his. For a moment it was as if the furnace doors of Hell itself had opened; but then the light died and it seemed that night had come; the blackest night in all eternity.

As his eyes recovered from the glare, the Brigadier realized that, overtaken by the onrush of events in which he'd had no part, he was standing with the stun-gun hanging uselessly in his hand; and Max was in plain view, albeit masked to an extent by the gathering darkness.

Maggie had come awake to the appalling danger that she was in. Looking vainly from side to side, whimpering,

‘Help me! Help me!’, she stood against the castle wall, totally exposed to Max’s malevolence.

The Brigadier raised the gun and fired at the shadowy figure by the wrecked flying machine. For the first time, there was no effect whatsoever. He lowered the gun with a sickening feeling of despair. All he could do was watch helplessly.

Suddenly Maggie’s nerve went completely and she was rushing towards the gate-house for an impossible refuge: the gate which was bolted against all comers with a beam which had taken three men to lift.

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But before she could even reach it, the inevitable happened. The darkness was lit up once more; a scream was cut short; and Maggie Pulacki’s life, that had so often been lived in violence, ended in the violence of total annihilation.

Sarah bent down to see if the key was in the lock. If it was, she could maybe do the old trick of… It wasn’t.

How could she have been such a dozy dim-wit as to let a kid like Louisa fool her like that? Well, let her get on with it, if that was what she wanted.

Then she remembered what the Doctor had said: the fate of the world could depend on her; and she felt even more angry.

Her? she thought. For Pete’s sake, when did she volunteer to be responsible for what was going on? It was like saying that she ought to pull down the Berlin wall single-handed or sort out apartheid or something.

But on the other hand, she was the one who’d stopped the clock and all – and she had begged the Doctor to let her do something about Louisa getting to be a ghost and….

Well, never mind the whys and the wherefores, she thought grumpily, what was she going to do now?

She gave an automatic glance at her bare left wrist and was rewarded by another flash of irritation. She didn’t even 277

know what time it was – but she’d better get a shift on because it must

be well on the way to midnight.

The simplest course, and probably the most efficacious in the long run, was to get out somehow and tell the Doctor

– yes, and Louisa's precious Powly. Together they'd soon put a stop to her nonsense, send the boy packing and generally sort things out; and Maximilian would stay definitively walled up for as long as the stones stood on top of one another; and that could be for another thousand years. It was too late for the softly softly approach.

As she started for the window with a vague idea of climbing out, her eye was caught by the letter Louisa had been writing. It was leaning against the candlestick on the writing table; and quite clearly, it was addressed to Sarah Jane.

Unfolding it, she read it in a few moments: –

My dearest Sarah,

I cannot tell you how it wounds my heart to deceive you so.

But if you have ever loved – if you shall ever love – you may one day comprehend. In the meantime I shall not importune your forgiveness, but shall confide in the kindness of your own heart and the trust that I have reposed in you that you will not betray my secret.

In this you will incur the eternal gratitude of Your loving friend,

Louisa.

As she finished, Sarah felt bitterly ashamed of herself.

No matter what the motive, she had no right to tell Louisa's guardian. She had promised not to – and the Doctor himself had said that you should be as responsible in this present moment – in this extraordinary present that felt as if you were living out a story that somebody else had written – as you were in the real one – oh God! – in the one that felt real because that was where you started.

So stop whingeing, Sarah Jane, and just get on with it!

Paolo Verconti did not like drinking alone. He found himself too often in the unfortunate position of having no other option; occasionally he would invite the priest to dine with him – a semi-illiterate peasant

under the veneer he had acquired in the seminary; and little Louisa's English governess could with difficulty be persuaded to take a rare glass of sweet sherry; but that was about the length of it.

So to find himself with such a congenial companion as the Doctor was to have good fortune doubly smiling on him; the more especially that he seemed content to postpone his bedtime indefinitely. It was well past eleven o'clock.

'I have taken the proceedings of your Royal Society for this age,' the Barone was saying carefully. 'The 279

astronomical papers in particular well repay a careful study.'

'I agree wholeheartedly,' replied the Doctor. 'I take it then that your interest in the stars is purely taxonomical?'

'By no means, sir. Indeed, I shall shortly demonstrate quite otherwise. My observations of our nearest planetary neighbour –'

'Venus?'

'I was referring to the daughter of our dear Mother Earth who graces our night sky with her presence. The Lunar Orb, Doctor.'

Really, the man was not so perspicacious as he'd first appeared to be.

'You are interested in the study of Astrology, I take it?

That you should refer to the Moon as a planet, I mean.'

The Barone picked up his glass and took a gulp of brandy. 'Superstitious fol-de-riddle, saving your presence,'

he said.

The Doctor was swirling the brandy in his glass, and staring into it as though looking into a crystal ball.

'I wish I could be so positive, Signore. As normally presented, perhaps. But there is some evidence that among the consequences of the warping of space by gravitational forces…' The Doctor's voice trailed away and he looked up.

What was the fellow talking about?

‘Your pardon, sir,’ said the Doctor. ‘It must be your excellent brandy speaking. As I told you, I am but a dabbler in these matters.’

The Barone drained his glass and stood up. ‘Come, Doctor. It is time for me to fulfil my promise. My hope is that I may show you the kind of reward you may win from a rational contemplation of the wonders of nature.’

There was no talking, rather a puffing and a panting and a grunting, as the Barone led the way up the tortuous staircase of the clock tower.

Up, up, up, past the doorway into the clock-chamber and on; and so at last into the little room in the clouds which was the Barone’s joy. Quite incapable of speech, he turned a beaming, shining face to the Doctor, and held his lantern high to illuminate all the marvels to be seen.

There were globes both terrestrial and astral, there were maps of the night sky, there were orreries and planetaria.

But sitting in pride of place was the marvel of marvels: a telescope.

‘It is by Dolland of London,’ the Barone managed to say. ‘I acquired it when I was living in Tunbridge Wells. I would venture to claim that it has the only six-inch speculum to be found south of Rome.’

‘I am most impressed, sir,’ said the Doctor.

‘Thank you,’ said the Barone, loosening his cravat. ‘But this is not why I have brought you here, at grave risk of an apoplectical seizure to the both of us. Pray step outside.’

Putting his lantern down on a small table, he opened a small door and went out onto the narrow balcony which ran all round the tower under the eaves of its pointed roof.

The Doctor followed him into the breezy night and obediently looked up to where the Barone’s finger pointed.

‘We are lucky, Doctor,’ he said.

In a gap between the massing thunder clouds it was as plain to the eye as the evening star on a clear summer’s night; plainer, for it was brighter than any star, with a glowing aura and a tail of light: a

comet.

‘No man has beheld this sight for one hundred and fifty seven years,’ Verconti continued. ‘When Clancy’s prediction to the Royal Society in 1661 proved accurate, its appearance precipitated such riots of superstitious fear that –’

‘Clancy’s comet,’ said the Doctor.

‘Is it not a wonder in nature, sir? Did I not promise you that –’

Again the Doctor interrupted him. ‘1661. Of course. Of course.’ Suddenly he slapped his forehead with his hand and exclaimed in a loud voice, ‘Fool! Fool!’

‘Your pardon, sir?’ said the bewildered Barone.

282

The Doctor swung round to him, but he was clearly not seeing him.

‘Orobouros!’ he said, as if it should be plain to an infant.

‘I fear I do not comprehend you.’

But the Doctor had gone; and when the Barone followed him back into the little observatory, there was nothing of him to be found there but the sound of his footsteps running down the steep stairs as if he were being pursued by all the devils of Hell.

283

Twenty-Two

Having been cheated of one hackneyed way of escaping from a locked room, that is by pushing the key out of the lock onto a sheet of paper, Sarah immediately thought of the other one: climbing out of the window on a rope made of bed sheets knotted together. It always seemed pretty easy.

The only trouble was that, even using the sheets from both beds and all the pillow cases too, by the time she’d used up a large bit of it to tie it to the bedstead, the rope still dangled some twenty feet from the ground; and she wouldn’t be much use to Louisa with a broken leg.

But as she was peering out, trying to work out what to do, she realized that the window of the room below was open and looked to be much

the same size; and the rope reached to its level with something to spare, even allowing for the bit of a sideways swing necessary to reach the windowsill.

There was nothing else for it.

She hitched up her ankle-length skirt, pulling it up under the high-waisted sash to form a sort of mini-dress, and clambered out onto the sill, lowering herself over the edge and trying to grasp the floppy cloth below with her feet as she'd learnt to do in the gym at school.

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But as soon as she put her full weight on the rope, it gave a lurch and she dropped her full length, to be left hanging by an insecure grip some thirty feet from the ground.

Oh God, she thought, her head swimming, the bed wasn't heavy enough. It must have slid across the floor.

She tried to get her legs round the dangling sheet, but it was flapping about in the squally air. She tried to let her left hand slide down a bit, but she couldn't bring herself to put all her weight onto her right hand; and all the time she could feel her strength going. She wouldn't be able to hang on at all much longer.

'Help! Help!'

She had shouted without even thinking; but the sound seemed to be swallowed up by the wind. She tried again; and again, with the extra power that real terror gave. And then – oh, thank you God! – the Doctor's voice.

'Sarah! Lift your feet and put them on the wall.'

She made a tremendous effort and managed it. The extraordinary thing was that it immediately made her feel better. Not only because she was no longer dangling helplessly, but by straightening her legs she seemed to be able to get a sort of grip on the rough-hewn stone with her thin-soled pumps.

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'Well done! Now, walk down a step at a time and a hand at a time. Inch by inch.'

She found she could do it. It was almost like the feeling of abseiling that she'd found so easy, swinging down the cliff at the summer camp when she was fourteen, only without the security of-the rope under her bum.

As she crept down, she could feel that the Doctor had grasped the end of the sheets; and presently she felt his strong hand reaching out to pull her into the safety of the open window.

'Oh, Doctor…' but she could find nothing more to say as she clung on to him, with her legs almost giving way under her; but then it all came flooding back: Louisa, Giuseppe and the story-book treasure; Maximilian and the fate of the world; how long this had all taken and…

She pushed him away and said, 'Doctor! It's almost midnight and…'

'I know,' he said, 'Orobouros. Come on!'

Somehow her legs found the strength to follow him as he ran from the room (the same room she'd seen Guido in when his Father was so angry, but empty now). As she tried to catch him up, through the gallery and down the last flight of stairs, she heard the thunder break at last, with a crash which hurt her ears; and as it died away, she realized that the clock was striking twelve.

With no hope left, she stumbled to the door and out into the courtyard after the Doctor.

The thunder and the lightning were almost continuous now, and by the fitful light she witnessed the whole dread story in a series of tableaux: Louisa in her white dress standing by the open door of the little workshop; Giuseppe inside with his pickaxe raised on high; the Doctor shouting

'No!'; and the pickaxe falling with the awful inevitability of Fate towards a wall glowing with an unnatural light.

Whether it was due to the lightning that struck or the unknown forces unleashed by the boy, it was impossible to tell, but the sound of the storm was joined by the thunder of collapsing stones as the great protecting wall of the ancient castle was swept into the sea, carrying with it most of the workshop and part of the clifftop beneath. There was no hope whatsoever that Giuseppe had not gone too.

With a scream which tore at Sarah's heart, Louisa ran forward, calling, 'Giuseppe!' She clambered over the pile of stones which were all that remained of the workshop, and ran to the newly made edge of the clifftop.

'Giuseppe!' she called again. 'Wait, my love. I'm coming!' and stepped out into the empty space.

At last the rain came; and as Sarah strove against the Doctor's restraining arm, the tears of Heaven coursing down 287

her cheeks mingled with her own until it was impossible to tell them apart.

But the tale was not yet told. Even as Sarah leant against the wall under the cloister where the Doctor had led her, empty and past hope, he left her side to move slowly forward towards the ruin with his hands held ready, half curled, like a wrestler waiting for his opponent to attack.

But what could he be expecting? Sarah thought. If Maximilian had been incarcerated in the wall that Giuseppe was meaning to open up, then he must have been swept into the sea too.

But then she understood. A movement on the edge of the cliff caught her eye. For an absurd moment she thought it might be Louisa, somehow safe from harm. But then she saw the great head, black hair plastered down by the sea and the torrential rain, and the strong left arm, hauling the body over the edge, and she recognized him.

The Doctor waited, quite still. Maximilian pulled himself to his feet. For a moment, they stood and gazed at each other in silence. Then Maximilian spoke, his deep voice rumbling through the dying thunder.

'Well, Doctor? What are you going to do? Kill me?'

The Doctor still did not move. Maximilian shrugged and turned away. With no attempt to hurry, he climbed to the 288

top of the ruined wall and walked away into the sheeting rain.

'But Doctor! You can't just let him go!'

Again Sarah saw the tiredness of the centuries in the Doctor's eyes. 'There's nothing we can do here,' he said.

‘We’d better go back. The Brigadier is going to need us.’

The Brigadier was under no illusion that the castle wall was defensible any longer. If the power which had possessed Maggie had passed into Max Vilmio, he could blast his way through any wooden barrier, no matter how thick; and that included the so far impregnable gate with its massive beam.

‘Back!’ he shouted, looking round into the darkness and hoping that the remaining members of his small force would be able to hear him. ‘Back to the keep!’

He ran down the stairs of the east tower and out into the middle of the bailey, by the pump. Stopping to see if there had been any reaction, he was relieved to hear the pounding footsteps of at least one of his charges – and a panting voice reiterating ‘Oh Lor’! Oh Lor’!’ as it went past. Jeremy, without a doubt.

He was followed moments later by a sedate trotting. It was Umberto, who passed closely enough to be seen and to see. Catching sight of the Brigadier waiting like the Captain 289

on the bridge of a sinking ship, he nodded to him politely, saying ‘Signore’, and disappeared at an even pace into the darkness.

But where was Mario? An old buffer like him might have been totally knocked sideways by the events of the last few hours, thought the Brigadier. He’d better go and see. It couldn’t be long before Vilmio made his next move.

But even as he heard a heavy thump on the gate, followed by the smell of burning wood, his uncle’s voice was borne thankfully towards him from the direction of the west tower.

‘Put me down! You think I am fireman to be lifted thus?

Put me down, I say!’

Roberto, who was proceeding in a stumbling rush with Mario slung across his shoulders, did not attempt to argue.

When he saw the Brigadier, he thankfully dumped his burden on the ground and together, one to each arm, they ran the little old man, legs dangling like a protesting toddler, to the relative safety of the keep.

Umberto was waiting by the iron-clad door in true butler style. But

even as he slammed it, the whole bailey was lit up by the glare of the gate exploding into flame.

The Brigadier led the way at a run upstairs to the great hall where they would be able to see from the window what was going on. Already the light of the burning gate had 290

faded away as the entire structure vaporized. But it was possible to see quite clearly by the light of the moon rising from the eastern horizon the giant figure of Max Vilmio silhouetted in the empty archway of the gate-house.

He stood for a moment, surveying his conquered territory, lightly balanced on the balls of his feet, ready for anything; and then moved forward into the moonlight.

'With any luck, the door of the keep may hold,' breathed the Brigadier, as if the enemy might be able to hear him through the thick stone walls.

'Couldn't we, oh, negotiate – or parley – or something?'

said Jeremy in a quaver. Nobody bothered to answer him.

Max was now in the middle of the open space. He stopped.

'Hold on to your hats,' said the Brigadier.

But at that moment, the sound came up the stairs of the bolts of the front door being drawn back, and the clanging crash of the door itself being flung open.

The Brigadier threw a glance behind him. 'Where's Mario?' he said.

Then they saw him, dancing into view below them, skipping forward towards the static figure by the pump.

'Good grief,' said the Brigadier, 'he's got his blunderbuss!'

291

Max raised his left arm and pointed it at the little man.

But Mario was quicker; he'd already aimed his outrageous gun. He pulled the trigger.

The effect was surprising. As the assorted missiles tore into Max, he

staggered back with a cry. Several bloody gashes had appeared across his face; and he threw his hands up to his eyes in a gesture that said quite plainly that they had been hit.

He took his arms down and spread them out in a questing manner, his head held back like Samson after his eyes had been gouged from his head.

With no attempt to aim, he let fly a bolt of fire from his left hand. But even if it had not wildly and harmlessly struck the stones of the western wall, Mario would have been safe. Already the watchers above could hear the bolts of the door being driven back into place, followed by the patter of the old man's feet up the stairs as he hastened to view the results of his handiwork.

Max had sunk to the ground and was sitting with his back against the pump, which he'd found by touch. He rested his elbows on his knees and covered his eyes once more.

'You've blinded him, by God,' said the Brigadier.

'Si,' said Mario. 'That will learn him to tingle with a Verconti.'

292

'What I don't understand,' said Sarah, brightly, as she came back into the control room of the TARDIS after changing back into her own clothes, 'is why he lost his arm.

If he's immortal, then surely any part of his body must be too?'

The only way that Sarah had been able to cope with her feelings was to put them on hold. She knew quite well that the distress she had suffered earlier when she thought of the fate awaiting her silly young friend was as nothing compared with the grief she felt once it had happened.

The present moment! she thought bitterly, as she pulled the sodden muslin off her back. None of it made sense. She was travelling back – no, forward – to a time when the present would be a hundred and fifty years and more away from the moment of Louisa's death, yet for her it would always be as immediate as if she had watched one of her school friends go under a bus.

There was a job to be done, she thought, holding her face up to the hot shower to let it wash away the physical and emotional dregs of

the last few hours. The Doctor and she had both screwed up. Twice. As proponents of the interventionist school of time travel, they'd make pretty good road sweepers.

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They'd only got one more chance, she thought, as she thankfully pulled on her jeans. It was bad enough this Vilmio person turning out to be immortal; if he managed to get control of all the fiends – sorry, teacher – N-Forms as well…

'What did you say?' said the Doctor, abstractedly. He was up to the same tricks at the control panel as he had been when they set off for 1818 the last time. Sarah resolutely closed her mind to the uprush of feeling the memory brought, sat down on the bench and repeated her question.

'His arm? Well, you're right in a way. The cells themselves – or rather, the organs the cells comprise – they do become immortal; infinitely self-healing. So whatever damage is done to the body by physical trauma or by pathogens or whatever will be repaired. But we're not talking about magic. If any part is lost entirely, it can't be regrown like a lizard's tail.'

Oh yes, that was another thing.

'Talking of lizards,' Sarah went on, 'what was all that about Orobouros? He was the dragon, wasn't he?'

But the Doctor was immersed once more in his calculations of the ETA of the TARDIS. 'Mm?' he said.

'You said "Orobouros" just before we both took off like scalded pussy-cats and saw…' She couldn't go on.

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The Doctor laid down his clipboard and came over to her. He sat down beside her and took her hand. She looked up at him.

Perhaps he was lying, back there in N-Space, she thought. Perhaps he can read my thoughts at this very minute.

'She isn't dead, you know,' he said. 'What made Louisa special can never die.'

‘I saw her die,’ said Sarah, ‘and so did you.’

‘We both saw her body die. But Louisa’s moved into N-Space, that’s all.’

‘Don’t you see, Doctor? I knew what was going to happen; I could have stopped it. She’s a ghost – one of the people you yourself said were lost souls – and I could have saved her.’

Sarah’s tears could be held back no longer.

‘It’s all my fault,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Sarah, blowing her nose hard. ‘It was just the thought of her going on and on and on…’ There was still a little catch in her voice.

After a little pause, the Doctor spoke very quietly, ‘I was once travelling through the mountains on Gallifrey with my old teacher,’ he said. ‘We’d been going for days; and it had been pretty hairy at times, what with blizzards and scorching sun and plungbolls and all. If I hadn’t been properly equipped, I’d never have made it.’

‘Plungbolls?’ said Sarah faintly.

‘Of course, you don’t have them here, do you? Little furry creatures, about the size of your thumbnail. They live up in the snow country, but if they sense any warmth they just attach themselves to it. Mountaineers have been found literally smothered by thousands of them. Anyway –’

‘How do you get rid of them?’

‘You used to be able to get an anti-plungboll spray. If you remembered to use it, they couldn’t attach themselves.

They just fell off, squeaking a bit.’

‘I think that’s sad,’ said Sarah.

‘Anyway,’ the Doctor continued, ‘in one of the high valleys, we came to a river that had burst its banks. The 296

water seemed more like a lake. You could just see the other shore if you looked really hard.

'My teacher took one look, dropped his bag, pulled off his robes and plunged in. He was obviously going to swim over.

'Then he realized that I wasn't following him. He turned and called out, "What are you waiting for?" But I just stood there, with my backpack and my climbing irons and my ice axe and my sleeping-bag and my foodsack – the lot. "Just leave it all," he said. "But what about the other side?" I asked. "Trust me," he said.

'So I stripped to the buff and followed him. It was great.

Like having a cold beer after a game of squatchtin –'

Sarah opened her mouth; and closed it again.

'– or like coming home after you've been away for months and months.' The Doctor started to laugh.

'What are you laughing at?'

'The old rogue knew all the time. He lived just the other side. We landed in his front garden.'

Sarah was laughing now.

'Louisa won't be a ghost forever,' said the Doctor.

'Is only poor old cadger, after all,' murmured Mario behind his hand to the Brigadier, when he discovered that Umberto, so far from having gone to the kitchen to get some 297

food as the council of war had assumed (and hoped), was lying on the floor under the big dining table, fast asleep.

Roberto having volunteered to go on a food recce ('Ain't no one gonna keep this baby from the chuck-wagon, man'), the desultory discussion on the best way to deal with Max continued.

Although the moon was by now quite high in the sky –

it was well past eleven o'clock – he was still sitting by the pump with his hands over his eyes as immobile as a statue.

Mario felt that the game was over. 'Is blind man buffer, now,' he said.

The Brigadier was not so sure. He had instituted a strict rota to keep an eye on him from the big window, and had restricted the inside lighting to one lamp.

Jeremy, the present watch-keeper, was busy trying to revivify the glorious and rare feelings he had experienced as the crack shot of the castello, overlaid as they were by his memory of being the filling in a sandwich of gun-toting thugs and a monster from Hell (or something of the sort; the Doctor didn't seem to believe in Hell as such).

Then again, everybody was so effusive in their praise of the old man – you didn't even have to aim a blunderbuss, for Pete's sake! – that they seemed to have completely forgotten their earlier hero.

Anybody with any nous would take cover when dozens of machine-guns opened fire, he thought once more; it was 298

only common sense. And a blunderbuss! Hardly state of the art, was it? And as for the fiend thingy, look what happened to Maggie.

He was so lost in the circling thoughts of his self-pity, with a tinge of regret for what might have been if there'd been time to get to know Maggie better, and a soupçon of guilt for remembering somebody who'd been vaporized in the way he was remembering her, that he didn't notice that Max was moving until he was actually on his feet.

At his urgent call, he was joined by the Brigadier and his uncle. The three of them watched while the big man stretched his arms high, as though he'd awoken from a profound sleep, turned, and walked slowly towards the keep.

'I get gun,' said Mario.

'Wait,' said the Brigadier.

Vilmio had stopped well short of the door. He raised his head and looked straight at the watchers in the window. The moonlight illumined his face as if it were trying to emulate the sun. There was no bloody gash; there was no blemish at all; and it was quite apparent that he was staring right at them.

Jeremy automatically drew back into the shadows.

'Still!' snapped the Brigadier, in an undertone.

But the sinister form turned away and walked purposefully and with growing strength along the front of the keep and round the corner out of sight.

He was going round the back! thought Jeremy in horror.

'I say, are the other doors locked?'

'I checked them myself,' said the Brigadier. 'On the other hand, they're ordinary wooden doors. Come on!

Uncle, bring your gun.'

He started for the other end of the hall. 'I'd better stay here and keep watch,' squeaked Jeremy; then, hearing the pitch of his voice, brought it down several octaves to add, 'I mean, suppose those chaps out there wake up and –'

'We'll keep together. Come along, I may need you,'

said the Brigadier, disappearing through the far door, closely followed by an excited Mario, clutching his blunderbuss in one hand and the leather pouch which contained its ammunition in the other.

The journey to the rear of the house was somewhat hampered by their having to wait for Jeremy to catch up; and by the stops for Mario to get his breath and for the Brigadier to remove the erratically waving blunderbuss from his uncertain-custody; and by the necessity for them to retrace their steps after the Brigadier, exasperated, had gone on ahead and taken the wrong turning.

But when they arrived at last at the window at the end of the first floor gallery which overlooked the courtyard, it was clear that whatever else he was up to, Max wasn't interested in getting in to the house.

He must have gained access to the cloistered yard by climbing over the ruined part of the wall, just as Sarah and Jeremy had on that first eventful evening. He was standing near the cliff-top with his back to them, holding his hands up in the air. The ever present wind gusting from the sea brought them fragments of his chanting, though Jeremy could make no sense of what he heard.

What was he trying to do? thought Jeremy. Was he summoning up

more of those beastly creatures? He'd had quite enough of them, thank you very much. Oh Lor'! Was that one coming now?

As they watched, a flicker of light was appearing among the fallen stones and in the air above the edge of the cliff.

'This is just what I was afraid of,' said the Brigadier.

'The Doctor warned me that he might try it.'

'But what's he doing? I don't understand,' said Jeremy, plaintively. Why did nobody ever tell him anything?

The Brigadier ignored his question. 'We've got to try and stop him – and we haven't got much time,' he went on.

'Now listen carefully…'

301

He glanced at his watch and then continued in even more urgent tones. 'Apparently midnight is H-Hour as far as Operation Max Vilmio is concerned.' Jeremy took a quick look at his own watch. Six minutes to go. Six minutes?

'If he times it right,' the Brigadier went on, 'he'll be through into N-Space; and all Hell will be let loose – and I'm not joking. But if he misses it, we've stopped him. Our only hope is to use the blunderbuss again as a delaying tactic.'

'Too far away. By far, too far,' said Mario.

'Precisely. That's where you two come in. I shall proceed to the door to the garden, and make my way to the archway between the garden and the courtyard. This will bring me into a commanding position on his right flank within close enough range to have a chance of at least blinding him once more – and perhaps doing him a real mischief.'

'Is my gun,' said Mario, reaching out to take it from the Brigadier.

'No, Uncle. I need you in the doorway below us, to distract his attention as I get into position. If he caught sight of me out of the corner of his eye, I'd be a goner.' And what about me? thought Jeremy. What delights has he thought up for me?

302

‘Now, your job, Jeremy,’ he went on, ‘is probably the most dangerous of the lot –’

I knew it! thought Jeremy.

‘But if you’re careful, you have a very good chance of getting away with it.’

Thanks a million!

‘The arch is in bright moonlight, but the cloisters on the other side are in deep shadow. I can’t approach from that side as the remaining wall of the outbuilding would mask him from me. But if you take up position there, ready to shout at the same time as Mario does, then I’m in with a chance.’

He glanced at his watch again. ‘Right now, check your watches. We’ll give ourselves two minutes to get into position, so that means –’

‘No got watch,’ said Mario.

For a moment, even the Brigadier looked nonplussed.

Then his face cleared.

‘Not to worry. Keep an eye on Jeremy. He’ll tip you the wink.’

‘Too far to see wink.’

‘Give you a hand signal, I mean. Like this. Right, Jeremy? In two minutes from – *now*. Go!’

As Jeremy hurried down the stairs, followed by the pattering feet of his co-decoy, his mood did not improve.

303

Decoys! That’s exactly what they were. Him especially.

As he eased the door open and peeped through the crack, he had a mental picture of the beautifully made decoy Uncle Teddy had the first and last time they’d gone wild-fowling together in Norfolk. When he saw it bobbing about in the marsh pool, he’d thought it was real. He’d have taken a pot-shot at it, if it wasn’t considered an unsporting thing to do to shoot a sitting duck.

Quack quack, he thought, as he slipped out into the shadows of the

cloisters. Quack bloody quack!

The Brigadier, having skirted round the perimeter of the overgrown garden, along the back of the house and up the wall to the arch, was in position with about thirty seconds to spare. He peeped cautiously round the comer. Vilmio was still chanting, though faster now.

He wondered whether Jeremy was in position. Best way to cope with a fellow in a bit of a funk, he thought. Give him a job to do. Show him you trust him.

He had a momentary qualm as it crossed his mind to ask whether he could in fact trust the said fellow-in-a-funk. The boy was fundamentally okay, but hardly one of nature's soldiers.

Twenty seconds.

On the other hand, the old chap was too keen by half.

He'd been lucky once but –

Fifteen seconds.

Concentrate, now. Only one chance and that's your lot.

The Brigadier felt again the uprush of controlled excitement, the addictive buzz which was the secret reward of his chosen profession.

Ten – nine – eight – seven –

Jeremy hardly looked at the great figure with his arms stretched on high as he scuttled as quietly and quickly as he dared past the empty couches of the Doctor's OB

Transthingy to his official lurking place behind the wall of the ruined shed. He glanced at his watch. Thirteen seconds to go. So far, so sort of good.

But then he looked up and saw the arch of light forming in space beyond the chanting Max. Worse, he could see through the shimmering glow to the other side. Glimpses, no more, flickering hints only, but unquestionably a legion of fiends coming and going, pushing and shoving, jostling for position as they waited – for what?

Jeremy could see jaws and claws, scales and feathers, glaring eyes and

flaring nostrils; but beyond anything, the teeth, the tearing, champing, grinding fangs. He shut his 305

eyes, screwing them up tight to force the sight from his brain.

The memory of why he was there returned with the shock of an ice-cold shower. His eyes snapped open and he looked at his watch. Four seconds. He raised his hand ready to give the signal.

'Hey there, nit-whisker, look this way!'

Oh God, Mario had taken his raised hand as the signal itself.

As he opened his mouth to add his own feeble shout to Mario's piping, several things happened.

The Brigadier appeared in the archway, blunderbuss aimed squarely at Max Vilmio, crying, 'No! This way!'

Vilmio, instead of swinging round in a start ready to attack as might have been expected, finished the phrase he was chanting in a crescendo of triumph. He himself was now glowing with a luminescence brighter than that of the archway of light. He turned slowly; slowly lowered his arms; slowly looked from one to another; and burst into laughter.

While this was happening, the noise of the sea and the wind and even the sound of Vilmio's voice was drowned by an angry whooping such as one might expect from a distressed whale.

306

It was just as well that Jeremy drew back against the wall, for on the very spot where a moment before he had been teetering with fear, not knowing which way was best to run for it, the TARDIS appeared, and moments later the Doctor emerged with Sarah.

At this, the derisive laughter died away, but the contemptuous amusement could still be heard in Vilmio's voice. 'Welcome back, Doctor. What a pity that you have arrived too late.'

He turned to the Brigadier. 'Why don't you pull the trigger, Mr Lethbridge-Stewart?'

The Brigadier, who up to this moment had kept the absurd old weapon trained on Vilmio, lowered it until it was pointing to the

ground. ‘I am no murderer,’ he said.

‘Spoken like a true Brit,’ said Vilmio.

The clock in the castle tower began to strike. At the first chime, the expression on Max Vilmio’s face changed. The sardonic sneer disappeared and was replaced by an inhuman blankness that yet was alive and ultimately malevolent.

To Jeremy, who’d woken up screaming the night after his first visit to the Zoo, it was like nothing so much as the gleam in the eye of the alligator, as it slips into the water to seize its unsuspecting prey.

307

Vilmio turned and walked towards the edge of the cliff, into the air and through the archway of light. As it started to fade, the Doctor spoke at last.

‘This is not the end, Maximilian Vilmius,’ he cried in a ringing voice; and as the luminous bow melted into the night sky, the watchers saw a hand raised as if in mocking acceptance of the Doctor’s challenge; but when they looked to see how he was taking it, they saw that he had already turned away and was gazing at the stars above the castle tower.

‘Orobouros,’ he murmured.

308

Twenty-Four

‘Who would you say was in all probability the biggest nincompoop on San Stefano Minore?’ asked the Doctor, twirling up a handsome bundle of spaghetti. ‘Certainly the biggest at this table.’

Sarah could see that Jeremy was trying to make out whether they were all looking at him, while apparently keeping his eyes firmly fixed on his plate. Poor old Jeremy.

‘If it was an open race,’ said the Brigadier, ‘I dare say we’d all stand a chance of a place. Why do you ask?’

It had taken quite a while for things to get back to a sort of normal. It was only the Doctor’s insistence that there was no immediate danger (‘He’s just come into his kingdom.

He'll want to enjoy it for a while.'), together with the opportune arrival of Roberto's announcement of 'Chow, folks' (which caused a certain amount of misunderstanding as at least half the company was under the impression that he was saying good-bye), that caused them at last to simmer down. Even Umberto, shocked to find that his kitchen had been invaded, was prevailed upon to partake of a plate of the pasta (with olive oil, garlic and parmesan, quite Sarah's favourite), though insisting that he would eat it in the kitchen.

309

'Clancy's comet,' said the Doctor. 'It's been in the papers, on the box, interviews with the Astronomer Royal and all that sort of thing, for at least a week. And I failed to make the – ah – the connection.' As he said the word, he lifted an eyebrow at Sarah.

'In 1661,' he went on, 'Theodore Clancy was going through the records, and he realized that a comet was due that year. It had shown up every one hundred and fifty-seven years since there'd been any sort of records at all; and yet nobody had realized that it was the same one. It was the famous "Star in the West", for instance (going round the wrong way, you see), which was supposed to signify the end of the world in 1033 – a thousand years after the crucifixion was thought to have taken place.

'And I missed it! Even with all the clues – "under the wing of the dragon" – "the flight of the dragon" – and so on.

I could have been one jump ahead, instead of trailing behind trying to catch up.'

The Doctor took a sip of vino. 'I strongly suspect that the Babylonians would have noticed it first, Very hot on astrology, the Babylonians; and as alchemists, well, what better symbol for the orbit of a comet could you have than Orobouros – the dragon who's perpetually swallowing his own tail?'

310

The Brigadier had been scribbling calculations on a bit of paper. 'Are you suggesting that the presence of this comet in, er…' He consulted his paper.'… in 1504 and 1818, and of course this year, was somehow mixed up in all this hooha with Vilmio?'

'No doubt of it,' said the Doctor. 'To find the elixir of life by binding together the earthly body and the N-Body; and then to break through

into N-Space as Maximilian has done; I'm not saying it would be impossible without the presence of the comet. But when it was overhead would undoubtedly be the most propitious time.'

Propitious! He sounded like the official soothsayer to a medieval court, thought Sarah.

'Come off it, Doctor,' said the Brigadier. 'You'll be having us consulting the entrails of a goat next.'

The Doctor laid down his fork. 'Thank you, Roberto. A feast fit for a king indeed.' There was a murmur of agreement from around the table (and a snore from Mario, who, having retired to his big chair by the dead fire to read *The House at Pooh Corner*, had promptly fallen asleep).

'Swinging, man,' replied the surrogate King of Rock, and picking up his guitar, he launched into a sotto voce rendition of 'Such a Night' to cover his pleased embarrassment.

311

'Tell me, Lethbridge-Stewart,' went on the Doctor, 'are you familiar with the mathematics of potential psycho-physical stresses in the metaphorical surface-tension of the boundary between this world and N-Space?'

'Not so as you'd notice,' said the Brigadier.

'I thought not,' said the Doctor.

Jeremy couldn't get to sleep for a long time. His campaign to prove himself was hardly turning out to be a success, in spite of his spectacular exhibition of marksmanship.

At last he went down to the great hall and borrowed one of the books from the pile by Mario's chair. *Tanglewood Tales* it was called. But even after reading a couple of the stories, he was as wide awake as ever.

He fell asleep at long last, having come to the conclusion that his best chance of showing that he wasn't the wimp everybody seemed to think him was to stay close to the Doctor and Sarah. She'd seemed to be really taken with the story of his sharp-shooting prowess – and he'd lost any chance of impressing the Brigadier once the real shooting started.

After breakfast the next morning – a breakfast of newly baked rolls which proved Umberto to be right back on form

– he overheard the Doctor saying that he was going to 'start 312

as soon as possible', so he discreetly stuck to his tail. He wasn't going to miss another chance of a trip in the TARDIS.

'But I don't understand,' the Brigadier was saying as he followed the Doctor in and out of the police box. 'If you say you now know how to mend the crack in the barrier, why not get on with it? Trap the blighter in there. Serve him right. From what you tell me, it isn't exactly Saint Tropez.

What's the point of going in after him?'

Back into N-Space! thought Jeremy. Amongst all the fiends?

'Firstly,' said the Doctor, taking out the strange construction which was the heart of the OB Transducer and dumping it by the beds, 'I couldn't do it just like that. I understand the principle now, thanks to the text Maximilian was using back in 1504, but I'd have to induce a stress in the psycho-spatial structure which would duplicate the warping effect of the comet, as I'm sure you'll understand.'

Was there a touch of sarcasm in his voice? If so, the Brigadier was ignoring it. 'And secondly?' he said, following the Doctor back into the TARDIS.

Jeremy nipped over to the open doorway to see if he could hear the answer – and was just in time for a near collision as they immediately returned, with the Doctor uncoiling the power leads he'd used before.

313

'Sorry,' he blurted, but they hardly seemed to notice him. Typical! They wouldn't just trample all over Sarah, now would they?

'Secondly,' the Doctor was saying, 'now that he's in there in his immortal body, with all the power of N-Space at his command, he doesn't even need the flaw in the barrier.

He can break through whenever he feels so inclined.'

'I see,' said the Brigadier.

'I've somehow got to uncouple the merged bodies. If I can do that, his

power is gone,' said the Doctor, plugging the leads into the back of the machine. 'Now, where is that girl? She should be here by now.'

Jeremy took a deep breath and stepped forward. 'Can I come too?' he asked. Oh, sugarlumps! It should have been, *may I*. If the Doctor was as strict on getting things right as Nanny had been he'd blown his chance already.

The Doctor looked at him in some surprise. 'Well, I take that very kindly, Jeremy. I wish I could take advantage of your offer. In the enterprise I'm about to undertake, the more allies the better. Unfortunately, I've only got an opening for one other, and I'm afraid I have to offer it to the person who has the experience. Ah, here she is at last.'

Huh! Exactly the same answer he'd had from all the crummy lot he'd tried to get jobs from before Uncle Teddy pulled a few strings and got him onto the *Metropolitan* 314

magazine. Still, he couldn't help feeling a surge of relief. A career in fiend-space was liable to prove a fairly short one.

And at least he'd shown willing. On top of his reputation as a crack shot that ought to go a long way towards –

'Oh, sorry,' said Sarah. 'Have I kept you waiting? I've been listening to Roberto singing. He's not at all bad, you know.'

She climbed on to her couch. 'He keeps reminding me of somebody,' she said.

'Elvis?' said Jeremy.

'Don't be daft,' said Sarah. 'He doesn't look a bit like Elvis.'

The Doctor had by now fitted the metal cap to her head and given her the brass hand-grips to hang on to.

'Oh, by the way,' he said as he climbed onto his own cot and attached himself to the circuit, 'the barrier had its worst shake-up yet last night. Don't be surprised if you get a sudden increase in phenomena.'

'Phenomena?' said the Brigadier. 'Do you mean fiends?'

'N-Forms – fiends, yes. And of course, if they can't find suitable partners to merge with, they'll be on the look-out for food, if you take

my meaning.'

'Thanks for the tip. And what do you propose we should do about it?'

315

'I'm sure you'll think of something, Lethbridge-Stewart. Didn't the stun gun turn out to be of any use? It should have given them a nasty jolt at the very least.'

The Brigadier's mind went back to the canine caterpillar creature. 'I only tried it on one, a pretty miserable specimen certainly. But, yes, it made him think twice.'

The Doctor lay back and picked up the hand-grips.

'Well, if you need more power, adjust it to the fine beam. I left it on the cone pattern – the spray – to make certain it couldn't miss, no matter who used it. Idiot-proof, in a word.'

So saying, he switched on the current to send him and his partner into N-Space, leaving one of his listeners in the position of the unfortunate in the parable: having no talents, he'd just had taken away from him even the one that he had.

Sarah's insouciance was only half real. Although she was pleased, and flattered too, that the Doctor had asked her to come, the double thought of facing both the fiends and her own feelings about Louisa made the coming trip something of an ordeal.

But now that she was actually feeling again the tingling, swishing, bursting out of the heaviness of matter into the floating enlightenment of the body she remembered from last time, she could only compare the experience with 316

jumping out of an aircraft – and for a split second not caring whether the parachute opened or not.

As she followed the Doctor into the light and this time forced herself to let it crumble away (crumble? What a ridiculous word to use about light! Yet that's exactly what it did), she was almost relieved to find her worst fears at once confirmed. For the bleak landscape she'd been anticipating was by no means deserted.

In scattered groups spread across the ground, there were fiends of every conceivable sort milling about uncertainly, like a herd of cattle

waiting to be led to the slaughter-house, with a sizeable number pushing and shoving as if to force their way through the crack of light which had been their own gateway to N-Space.

The Doctor seized her by the hand and drew her up above them. ‘They won’t bother us this time,’ he said.

‘They’ve got other concerns.’

As he led the way through the heavy air, the miasma of decay which rose from below made Sarah feel quite sick; but she made herself look down to see what she could of the fiends.

There were large ones like, but horribly unlike, the ones they’d met before, yet almost benevolent to the eye in spite of their unnaturally distorted features, so far were they from the most evil of their fellows. Of these, from which Sarah 317

turned away her face in disgust and horror, the nastiest was undoubtedly the rotting carcase of a diseased beast with the face of a crazed hyena, half eaten away by grubs as thick as a thumb, which yet contrived to crawl inexorably forward chewing its suppurating way through anything it found in its path.

But perhaps the most disturbing of all were the small ones, the creepy-crawlies some six inches long which squirmed and slid and chewed unspeakable things in foetid heaps of slime, yet without the blind anonymity of the maggot or the slug, for each one had a pair or more of unwinking eyes somewhere along its body.

‘This is the result of the take-over by our friend Maximilian,’ said the Doctor, dropping back to fly companionably alongside her.

Suddenly Sarah wanted to giggle. She was irresistibly reminded of the bike rides she used to take into the uplands behind the suburb where she’d been brought up; the two of them, Jenny and her, chatting away as they rode along side by side, revelling in the freedom of the country lanes and the intensity of their thirteen-year-old friendship. Maybe they could stop off for a Coke later. She must suggest it to the Doctor.

But suddenly she didn’t feel like giggling any more.

318

The thought of Jenny, dear Jenny with her absurd enthusiasms and

escapades (like the time she turned up on Speech Day dressed impeccably in full school uniform but with a mini-skirt shorter than Mary Quant's), reminded her so much of Louisa that all her grief came back.

She thrust it away and forced herself to listen.

'The N-Forms are gathering to be ready for the grand breakthrough into our world. He's started to establish his power in N-Space, clearly, but at the moment it would seem that there's more confusion than anything.'

How could he be so calm about it?

'Where are we going?' said Sarah.

'If I'm not very much mistaken, we're going to visit a king,' the Doctor replied.

'A king?' This wasn't what she'd expected at all.

'You've got to remember, he's fundamentally from the middle ages, our Max. He's steeped in the attitudes of the period. He wants power – and who had the most power back then?'

'A rhetorical question is one that expects no answer,'

said Sarah, noticing that the herds of creatures below them seemed to be thinning out a bit.

The Doctor laughed. 'I'd lay odds that he wasn't even christened Maximilian. He named himself, after the Emperor. And it's no accident that he ended up in the world 319

of the Mafia, where the Godfather is nothing more nor less than the king of his Family, with all the trappings of the feudal monarch except his robes and his crown.'

Sarah was hardly listening. For the landscape was changing. The featureless plain was becoming more craggy and broken. Right ahead she could see mountain ranges and rocky valleys, mighty waterfalls and cascading torrents. No trees graced the slopes, no meadows the bottoms of the chasms; all was as lifeless as the flatland they were leaving and twice as threatening. Even the sky was darkening to a dirty purple.

But most disturbing of all was the fiery red glow which lit up the far side of the heights; and as they flew into the narrow canyon ahead the air grew hotter and the light more glaring until it seemed that they must surely be flying towards the mouth of the eternal furnace of Hell itself.

320

Twenty-Five

'Happy, Uncle?' asked the Brigadier, dubiously surveying the little man, who was reclining with his feet up on a *chaise- longue* which had been carried out of the (unused) small drawing room by the library by a grumbling Jeremy and a warbling Roberto.

It had been strategically parked in the cloisters so that Mario could be in a position to watch the comatose bodies in the cage of wire. There was a pile of books on a table nearby, with *Mother Goose* prominent on the top, a bottle of vino and a glass – and of course the faithful blunderbuss.

'Happy? Si. Happy as a pig in a rug,' replied Mario.

'Good. Now, if the Doctor comes back – that is to say, if he wakes up, tell him we've gone out to collect the guns from Vilmio's people.'

'Right on, man,' said Mario, picking up his favourite book.

As the Brigadier made his way over the broken wall and round to the front of the keep, he was still kicking himself for not having thought of the guns earlier.

Blasted fiends, he thought. And ghosts. At least with aliens from the other side of the Galaxy you were dealing with flesh and blood. Even if the blood turned out to be purple or green, you knew where you were.

321

Once Vilmio's lot had been dealt with so successfully by the stun-gun (and a flicker of amusement lightened his mood as he thought of Jeremy's recent discomfiture), their rifles had just gone out of his head. Thank Heavens the stun-gun effect lasted for as long as it did.

Roberto and Jeremy were waiting for him by the main gate with a decrepit wheelbarrow they'd found in one of the out-houses. They'd

calculated that there were at least twelve guns out there, not even counting the ones that Maggie had blasted, possibly more; no mean load.

The Brigadier led the way out of the gatehouse.

Everything seemed quiet. The mangled remains of the helicopter were the only sign that it wasn't a perfectly ordinary spring morning, with the heat of the sun starting to be felt through the morning breeze. The goats, having discovered that their gate had been left open by Max Vilmio in his bolt for the chopper, had left their sparse field. They seemed to have recovered from their surprising experience and were happily discussing the quality of the scrubby grass on the pathside verges.

'Hey, man,' called out the Brigadier's forward scout,

'this baby ain't gonna wake up like this side judgement day.'

The Brigadier hurried over, followed by Jeremy gloomily trundling the barrow. The man who had fallen 322

from the top of the ladder which Maggie had pushed over at the beginning of the attack was now a corpse with a broken neck. His gun was found nearby in the long grass at the bottom of the wall.

'What's that?' hissed Jeremy in sudden fright.

A gargling animal noise was coming from the wood.

Stun-gun at the ready, the Brigadier cautiously investigated.

The two companions of the dead man were lying where they had fallen, with their open mouths making the noise in question, which was disconcertingly not quite a snore. Their rifles were added to the one in the barrow.

Good show, thought the Brigadier. If the rest were as easy, they'd be done in two shakes of a billy-goat's tail. He wouldn't be really happy until he got back inside and relieved the old man.

The Doctor, to Sarah's surprise, came to a stop before he rounded the corner where the source of the red glare would have been revealed, coming to earth near the summit of a small peak of black granite. As she landed nearby and followed him cautiously to the top, she became aware of a cacophony of sound, composed of snarls and roars, cries of

fear and screams of agony, melded into an uproar of pain and terror.

323

When she could overcome the vertigo the oven heat induced, her first overwhelming impression was that she'd seen it all before.

That painter guy, she thought. What was his name?

Something-or-other Bosch. He must have been to N-Space himself.

'Hieronymous Bosch,' said the Doctor, having to pitch his voice up to top the din from below. 'Quite right. I shouldn't be surprised if Maximilian knew him before he…

Are you all right?' He put out a hand to steady her.

'I think so,' she said. But she was lying. This was no painting, this panorama of torment lit up by the great cave of roaring fire at the other end of the valley, her mind was shrieking at her, these were real people being tortured.

That man screaming as he was crushed beneath a cart-load of gold coins was probably a husband and a father.

That half-naked woman being torn into two pieces by half-human satyrs was as needy for love as any weeping child.

Those shivering – yes, shivering! – skeletal figures waiting in a docile supermarket queue for their turn to be pitchforked into the everlasting flames were her sisters, her brothers.

'If it's what they believe…' said the Doctor gently.

'Look; and look again,' he added, pointing above the maw of the great furnace to the rocks which formed its roof.

324

Just as she had learned to see the ghosts when she first came into N-Space, now she saw – and realized that she had seen all along, but not taken it in – but how could that be?

All of twenty feet tall – no, more like thirty – even seated as he was on his throne of molten gold (as it seemed), the unmistakable form of Maximilian leaned back at his ease, surveying the entertainment set before him, picking at the delights on offer as at a buffet, chuckling

with sadistic pleasure when he lighted on some offering which was to his particular taste.

As the Doctor had predicted, he was wearing the robe of a medieval monarch, over a suit of golden chain-mail, with a gold chain of S's around his neck (like Olivier in the movie of Henry V, Sarah recognized with a little dissonant shock) and a bejewelled crown of the magnificence one might expect to see on the Emperor of Hell.

Surrounding the throne, like a pack of diminutive courtiers (diminutive? they were at least fifteen feet tall) were six or seven sinister figures with hunched shoulders and glowering eyes, wrapped in black cloaks or robes which they hugged close to themselves. Were they monks, like Nicodemus? Or were they… And Sarah realized that they weren't even human. They were fiends, of a sort she'd not seen before, and their apparent cloaks were simply leathery 325

wings wrapped around them like bats. They were more a bodyguard than a court.

Sarah turned back to the Doctor, who was digging into his inside pocket.

'Well that's it, isn't it?' she said, trying to hide the way she was shaking. 'He's won.'

The Doctor was muttering to himself. 'Surely I wouldn't have been so stupid… Ah! Here it is! What did you say?' he said, pulling out his sonic screwdriver and peering at the calibrations on its shank.

'There's nothing to be done,' said Sarah.

'Stuff! One might even go so far as to say gammon!'

'But what can you do?'

'Do?' he said, looking up from his adjustments. 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Sarah Jane Smith. I'm going to challenge him to a duel.'

Mother Goose having proved to be a more efficient soporific than *Tanglewood Tales*, Mario had thankfully fallen into the innocent sleep of second childhood, a light doze as free of dreams as any three-month-old babe's.

Certainly nightmares were not an option.

So when he opened his eyes at the touch of a bony finger, he was merely irritated to find a drooling mouth with dagger-sharp fangs inches away from his face. He stared 326

into the bloodshot eyes, seeing his own reflection staring back at him.

'Go away,' he said firmly.

As he had expected, it backed away, staring at him and shaking its shaggy head as if bewildered. It was a medium-sized two-legged creature not unlike a werewolf that hadn't managed the full switch. It gave a tentative growl.

Its movement had revealed that it wasn't alone.

Swarming all over the protective cage of electric cable, eager to get at the Doctor and Sarah, were something like half a dozen assorted fiends, with more pushing forward to join them from the direction of the fallen wall.

There were largish ones and smallish ones; fierce ones and disgusting ones; ones that could tear out a throat with the swipe of a claw and ones that would be content to gnaw at the guts of a half-dead victim. None was likely to improve the condition of the still bodies inside the wire framework.

Mario was still not worried. If anything he was bubbling inside with a sort of glee: the sort of glee which knew that these presumptuous beasts were about to get the surprise of their lives.

He slowly put out his hand and picked up his blunderbuss. None of the fiends seemed to notice, bar the 327

lupine creature that had woken him, which put its head on one side like a puzzled puppy and whimpered.

He raised the gun to his shoulder, aimed it at the crawling, snarling mass and pulled the trigger.

With a ferocious bang, the charge flew from the muzzle at point blank range – and went straight through the target and out the other side, clattering against the TARDIS

beyond and falling to the ground.

But the attack did have one effect. The Doctor and Sarah were quite

forgotten. Every fiend in sight swung its head towards the sound; and every one started to move inexorably in Mario's direction.

Up to this moment Mario had not been afraid of the *piccoli diaboli*, feeling rather affectionate towards them than otherwise. But now, as they advanced on him, he felt a tremor of fear.

He glanced over his shoulder. The man-wolf had taken up a position between him and the door. There was no escape; nowhere to run to.

The fear vanished. Quite an adventure this was. For several years now, every time he went to sleep at night, he'd expected that when the morning came he'd wake up dead. It would be interesting to be conscious.

The vanguard, the more nimble of the grotesque company, slowly moved nearer, while their awkward 328

brothers were still clambering off the wire cage. Would they eat him? Or was he about to be possessed?

He closed his eyes.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes.

He was surrounded by a ring of staring creatures, those with recognizable faces all having the puzzled expression he had already seen on the face of the wolf.

For a long moment they looked at him as if bemused by his appearance; and he looked at them with mild curiosity.

Then a cow-like creature (at the front end, its tail being more like a mammoth earthworm) shambled away on its only two legs, to be followed one by one by its fellows.

Feeling curiously cheated, Mario watched them all vanish round the comer, some floating, some laboriously mounting the heap of stones from the ruined wall. Should he run through and warn Alistair that they were on their way?

Perhaps he would in a little while.

He poured himself another glass of wine and picked up his book. Presently his eyes closed.

Alistair would find out for himself soon enough.

The difficulty with N-Space, Sarah was thinking, as the Doctor walked down the hillside, was that you never knew from one moment to the next what the rules were supposed 329

to be. Why was he walking, for Pete's sake? They'd flown all the way here, hadn't they? And how in Heaven's name (and maybe that was right too), how was he going to fight a duel with Maximilian when he didn't come up to his knee?

But even as she thought this, her mind did the same shimmer as before, and she realized that the Doctor, who had reached the foot of the hill, was just as tall as the great figure at the other end of the valley. It wasn't that she watched him grow, or that he changed in the wink of an eye, rather that, once it had happened, it had always been so; and of course, that was rubbish.

And where were all the people in their N-Bodies? And all the fiends and such? And the cave of everlasting fire?

The whole bang shooting match had gone. Pffft! But not pffft! at all. They just weren't there. Had they ever been there?

Maximilian stood up, the very archetype of regal power.

His sonorous voice echoed from the granite rocks. 'You dare to enter the realm of Maximilian, little man! You are either very brave or very foolish.'

The Doctor's voice, in contrast, lacked all bombast.

Clear and ringing, it seemed to epitomize the rationality which ruled his life. 'I've come to call your bluff, Vilmio.

This game is over. You are no king.'

330

'You do not know to whom you speak. No king? Shall I not hereafter be king of the very world? Why else do you seek my downfall? Am I not even now the king of the underworld? Where is Lucifer, where Beelzebub?'

Yes, thought Sarah, where are they? If this is Hell, there ought to be a Devil.

And then she realized with a shock of mental self-disgust that she was being sucked into his system of beliefs, his view of the world. This was N-Space, not Hell.

'Where indeed?' said the Doctor.

'Did they not flee at my approach? As you should flee ere you reap the reward that your impertinence and your arrogance deserve.'

The Doctor lifted his chin. It seemed to Sarah that he grew even larger. ' *My* impertinence! *My* arrogance! You call yourself a king? You have proved over and over again that you are unworthy to be a man!'

'What!'

'Those you have killed, those you have tortured, those whose lives you have corrupted, all add their voices to mine, crying out in accusation. I say again, you are no king.

You are less than the dirt beneath their feet.'

With a great shout of fury, Maximilian flung off his royal cloak, drew his sword and leapt from the rock. to confront the Doctor; and at his movement the bat-like fiends 331

(though their faces were more like pterodactyls) unwrapped their leathery wings and took to the air, fluttering around the head of their master like butterflies around a buddleia, uttering hoarse cries of alarm and threat.

To Sarah's horror, as the hefty sword of the ultimate pretender came crashing down, all the Doctor had to defend himself with was, of all things, his sonic screwdriver.

But as he held it up to parry the blow it was no longer a puny thing to be dashed from his fingers and leave him defenceless but a two-handed battle sword as large as his attacker's, silver-bright and sharp enough to slice through a floating feather.

The duel that followed was no fencing match, though the heavy swords flashed through the air like sabres. The Doctor had bitten off too much this time, thought Sarah, wincing at every blow from the figure in mail – for every blow was enough to chop off a limb or cut off a life. There was no way he could avoid being killed that she could see, other than by killing Maximilian; and how he was going to do

that…

The Doctor was being beaten backwards towards the steep valley side, managing to parry the torrent of blows but having no chance to riposte. But before he even got his back against the wall – oh God! – he fell. Had he tripped? Sarah's hand went to her mouth and she almost cried out.

332

But no, he'd fallen on purpose, to escape the rain of blows. Completing the backwards roll, he ducked under the flying sword and took off up the crags behind him.

'Come back, poltroon!' The giant voice reverberated through the valley.

But the Doctor didn't stop until he had reached the pinnacle of the rock that he was climbing. Then he turned and stood, his sword outstretched before him, and waited.

333

Twenty-Six

When Maximilian reached the Doctor it was to find that the tables had been turned. Sarah saw with a grim exultation that no matter how much he tried to reach up with his sword, the Doctor's blade was there first, not only parrying the blows but attacking with a ferocity which had his opponent ducking and weaving as a lightweight boxer might to avoid the knockout blow of a champion; and all the time, the fiends of the air hovered and swooped around him, with their raucous cries cheering him on.

But then – first blood! Coming in under the Doctor's guard, a lucky snick by Maximilian cut into his leg half-way down his left thigh.

For a moment, the Doctor was on the verge of falling.

But using the swing of his sword to regain his balance, he turned a full circle in a pirouette as skilful as any dancer.

The momentum of the turn took Maximilian by surprise. The Doctor's outstretched blade swished through the air, catching him near the shoulder of his right arm, his sword arm, slicing it off as neatly as a butcher's cleaver cuts out a chump chop.

Sarah's insides clenched. But the expected gush of scarlet blood didn't come. Instead, she heard a clanging and a clanking as the severed arm bounced down the slope, 334

coming to rest in a cleft of rock at the bottom still clutching the sword in a ludicrous parody of the arm which held Excalibur.

Of course! Maximilian's right arm was the false one!

But Sarah had no time to wonder how this could be.

Before the Doctor could take advantage of the new situation, his adversary shouted aloud to his flying bodyguard of monsters.

'Kill him!' he cried, with a wild gesture of his remaining arm.

Beating back the flailing wings with his free arm, windmilling the bright sword in his hand to keep away the snapping jaws, the Doctor seemed to be fighting a battle that was lost before it began. As he fought off one savage attack after another, it appeared that nothing could prevent the creatures from ripping him to pieces or toppling him from his precarious perch.

But it wasn't the Doctor who lost his equilibrium, it was Maximilian. Shouting with laughter and almost dancing with glee, he moved back to avoid the wings whipping past his head and stepped into empty space. Flat aback, waving helplessly as he clutched vainly at the air, he followed the path taken by his arm and landed, with a thud which shook the granite rocks, impaled on his own sword.

335

For a short while he screamed and writhed, kicking violently as if to ward off the approach of death. But then he fell silent and his movements slowed to a feeble twitching; and then stopped altogether.

The Doctor stood quite still watching from on high, for at Maximilian's yell of alarm, his attackers had drawn back as if to see why he had called; and when he died, they voiced a chorus of acrid cries and flapped heavily away, vanishing into the mountains.

So what now? thought Sarah. You couldn't kill an N-Body, the Doctor had said so. Presumably Maximilian would soon come back to life and they'd be back to square one.

But the wonders she was to view were not yet over. The Doctor hadn't

finished. Climbing down the mountainside, he approached the lifeless body of his enemy. Momentarily pausing, as if to make sure he was really dead, he lifted his heavy sword in both hands high above his head.

Oh God, thought Sarah. Surely he's not going to… But before she had time even to finish the thought, the sword came flashing down.

Then it was that Sarah saw the greatest wonder of all.

As the blade descended, it was no longer the figure of a white-haired man in a dusty velvet jacket that she was watching, but a helmeted figure in a suit of armour of 336

shining silver; and it wasn't the defeated Maximilian that he was beheading, but the limp body of a fearsome winged dragon, with scales of iridescent green and trails of smoke floating from its nostrils.

She couldn't bear to look. She screwed her eyes tight, and waited for the sickening sound of blade cutting through flesh. But it didn't come.

She tentatively opened her eyes. No longer was the giant figure of Saint George (or could it have been Saint Michael?) standing before her. Nor was there a dragon.

Way down in the valley, a tiny Doctor was holding something before him – it could only be the sonic screwdriver. On the ground at his feet was stretched a body.

But it was not the body of a crowned king dressed in golden mail. It was the corpse of Max Vilmio, in his crumpled linen suit, silk shirt and Gucci moccasins; and he was still wearing his head.

As she watched, she heard faintly through the silence of the mountains the buzzing sound of the sonic screwdriver; and to her amazement, the body at the Doctor's feet was somehow duplicated. Again, she didn't see it happen: the second body was just there, as if it had been there all along.

Again there was the buzz from the screwdriver in the Doctor's hand. But this time, she was able to be aware of what happened, as it happened. The body which had 337

appeared abruptly vanished, leaving the one limp corpse behind.

'Thank you for your help,' said the Doctor as he landed by her side.

‘Me? I was only watching.’

‘I couldn’t have done anything without the help of your belief,’ he said.

He turned and looked down at the lonely figure of the dead man.

‘Let’s go home,’ he said.

The first fiend appeared just when the Brigadier was congratulating himself on a job well done. They had collected all but the last two rifles, eight in all. One other of the climbers, the one to the immediate west of the gatehouse, was also lying at the foot of his ladder, but he wasn’t dead. He must have been caught in the sweep of the stun-gun. The two others had disappeared, taking their guns with them.

They were going through the far end of the olive grove to get the last guns from the two who had taken cover in the woods there when Roberto suddenly exclaimed, ‘Hey there, man!’

‘Get down!’ snapped the Brigadier, when he saw the six-foot spider with a lion’s face sailing over the wall 338

beyond the gatehouse. ‘And keep quiet!’ he added in a hiss between his teeth when Jeremy started to speak.

‘No, but I mean,’ said Jeremy, also in an urgent whisper. ‘The Doctor said that gun thingy would stop them.

Let’s try it.’

‘It’ll only stop them temporarily. There’s no point in calling attention to ourselves.’

He lifted his head cautiously and parted the long grass to see what was going on. The others followed suit.

They were not the only ones to be interested. One of the errant goats, standing by the orange grove gate, was gazing up at the floating spider as a human might at a flying saucer; and then its attention – and the Brigadier’s – was caught by the sight of another fiend coming over the wall, a hairy serpent with spikes for horns, while through the gate crawled a blob of green mucus some four feet across, which left plenty of room alongside for the skeletal mastodon with its giraffe legs and trunk like a stockwhip.

‘It’s a mass break-out, by God!’ whispered the Brigadier.

As the first arrivals started to roam up and down, as if seeking food, they were followed by five more, two flying through the air, two laboriously crawling and one, a crab-like beast seemingly with springs in its legs, proceeding by zig-zag leaps.

339

It was this one which found the first of the unconscious men, the one they had just left, lying by his ladder at the west wall. With a creaky squeak, it leapt on his back and gripped his body with its hinged legs.

‘Oh yuk! It’s going to eat him,’ whispered Jeremy.

‘No. It’s not eating him,’ said the Brigadier, who was looking through the spy-glass. ‘I’m afraid it’s as the Doctor said it might be. It’s merging with him. He’s being possessed, like Maggie was.’

The creature had by now disappeared completely and the man sat up, rubbing his eyes. He got to his feet and stared around stupidly.

The goat by the gate, who had been so taken aback by the new arrivals that it had quite forgotten to continue eating, decided to enlist the aid of this human friend. It let out a loud bleat, which made the friend in question jump.

His reaction was hardly friendly, however. Lifting his hand, he let fly a bolt of energy which in a matter of seconds had reduced the animal to a lingering stench of burning hair and a memory of Sunday dinners.

‘Here we go again,’ said the Brigadier.

‘Yes, I killed him. No, he’s not dead. You can’t kill an N-Body,’ said the Doctor, as they flew back.

340

‘But he’s no longer immortal in his earthly body, because I severed the two,’ he continued. ‘That’s why we have to get back as quickly as possible and close the flaw in the barrier, before he has a chance to reunite them.’

‘And you did it with that screwdriver thing? How did it become a sword?’

‘He felt its force as a weapon and so, in the frame of reference he had

established, he saw it as a sword.'

'But I saw it as a sword, too.'

'Well, of course. It had become a sword.'

'Like his.'

'Like his.'

'But his sword was real. He cut your leg with it. I saw the blood. It was a real wound.'

'Which healed up as soon as I killed him,' said the Doctor.

They flew along in silence for a while.

'You still don't get it, do you?' said the Doctor.

'Everything here is as real as your mother's pussy-cat –'

'Poodle,' said Sarah.

'Poodle,' said the Doctor. 'It's just a different order of reality. To say it's all a matter of belief, or it's all in the mind, doesn't make it any the less real. You could say the same of your perception of your Auntie's budgie.'

'Parrot,' said Sarah. 'Fair enough. But the difference is that here, if you believe that you can fly, you can. Right?'

'Right.'

'So why didn't you? He'd have been a sitting duck for a bit of dive-bombing.'

'It would never have worked. His mind was set in such a rigid system of belief that I had to challenge him on his own ground, so to speak.'

'I see,' said Sarah, doubtfully.

'He's stuck, you see, as badly as any of your ghosts. It's only when you understand that you're free to see things as they are.'

She thought that she knew what he meant; though seeing things as

they were was a bit difficult when they kept changing.

Even as they returned over the flat plain they'd flown across earlier, what she could see below was different all the time. Sometimes she could see the herds of N-Forms still; sometimes people in their N-Bodies – ghosts – acting out their sad tales. Yet she never saw one changing for the other; and what she saw was never a surprise to her.

So when at last they found themselves coming back to the castle, she wasn't at all taken aback to find that she was seeing it as it was in Louisa's day, with the ugly gash in the wall as if it had only just collapsed – though it was with a 342

lurch of her heart that she saw the figure in white wandering through the cloistered yard, wringing her hands and calling,

'Giuseppe?' over and over again.

Nor was it any surprise to find herself on the cliff-top walking towards the sad lost girl. It seemed perfectly natural

– indeed, the rightest thing she'd ever done – to take her hands and speak to her.

'Louisa?'

For a moment, she seemed not to have heard. But then her eyes found Sarah's face. She spoke as one coming out of a dream.

'Sarah? Sarah Jane? My dearest creature, is it indeed you?'

'Yes, my love, it's Sarah.'

'It's been so long. So long.'

The empty eyes wandered round the courtyard. 'I was engaged to meet Giuseppe here. He is going to…'

Her voice died away and a sly look came over her face.

'But that's a secret,' she said.

'Come with me, Louisa,' said Sarah, trying to draw her gently forward.

'But no,' she answered, pulling her hands away. 'I cannot. I must await Giuseppe.'

343

Her eyes scanned the courtyard once more until they alighted on the pile of broken stone. A look of horror came into her eyes.

‘No!’ she cried. ‘It cannot be!’

She took a step forward. Her hands flew up to her temples as though to stop the memories. A cry of grief burst from her lips.

‘He’s gone, my lovely boy. Giuseppe!’

Her voice re-echoed round the cloistered walls. She started forward towards the cliff edge.

‘Giuseppe! Wait, my love. I’m coming!’

Sarah stepped in front of her. ‘No! You mustn’t!’ she said. Louisa tried to push her way past, but Sarah threw her arms around her body and held her back.

‘Let me go, let me go. Without Giuseppe, there is nothing left.’

She was fighting Sarah now with all the strength of desperation, Sarah was only just managing to hang on to her.

It’s no good, she thought. I can’t do it; any more than we could change the past.

But just as she was about to give in, Louisa stopped struggling. All her strength seemed to leave her and she collapsed weeping into Sarah’s arms.

344

They sank to the ground together, Sarah holding Louisa close as if she were comforting a lost child, patting her on the back and murmuring, ‘There, there. It’ll be all right,’

and knowing that somehow she was telling the truth.

The violence of the storm passed at length, and Louisa’s sobs dwindled to a shivering intake of breath each time she spoke.

‘Oh, Sarah Jane, must everybody I love be taken from me? I know full well I cannot live without him. Indeed, if I do not follow him, I must surely die of sorrow.’ Her tears took over once more; but she was

quieter now.

‘Listen to me, Louisa,’ said Sarah, sitting back. This was it, she thought. This was her chance to put things right.

‘Giuseppe is dead – but he died a long time ago. Many years have passed since then. Try to remember.’

Louisa’s little face turned up to her. ‘I do not comprehend your meaning,’ she said. But then she frowned and her eyes wandered away from Sarah’s face as if she were seeking the answer to a riddle. ‘And yet… And yet I…’

She continued uncertainly, ‘I know I left you but an hour ago – oh, my sweet Sarah, can you ever find it in your heart to forgive your treacherous friend? I have repented that I deceived you so this long age…’

345

The wondering expression came back. ‘How can that be when it is but an hour since we talked together?’

Sarah leant forward and took the small white hands in hers. ‘Tell me what happened when the clock struck twelve.’

Her face crumpled like a little girl’s. ‘Must I?’

‘Please,’ said Sarah gently.

Louisa took her hands away and folded them in her lap as though she were about to recite to her governess a piece she had by rote. But she spoke as if her lesson had been imperfectly conned, in little rushes of words which trailed away in puzzlement.

‘My spirits were high, for Giuseppe was to… But never mind that; and indeed he…’

A pause…

‘But then the lightning came and…’

A longer pause.

‘And Giuseppe was…’

The tears were very close as she relived the experience in her mind’s

eye.

‘And then I…’

As she stopped speaking, her hands flew to her mouth and her eyes opened wide as she remembered what she had done.

‘It’s true,’ said Sarah.

346

Louisa rose to her feet and looked around the colonnaded yard ‘This is not Heaven, indeed it is not. And yet I – I remember that I…’ Again she did not finish.

She turned and her voice was a cry for help. ‘Oh Sarah, what shall I do?’

Sarah stood up, smiling with relief. ‘Come on, my lovely Louisa.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’ll soon find out.’

But still she hung back. Sarah held out her hand.

‘Trust me,’ she said.

347

Twenty-Seven

The Doctor might have said that it was synchronicity, thought Jeremy, though not serendipity, for it was hardly a happy accident that there were exactly as many fiends as there were unconscious bodies waiting to be taken over.

He and the others had watched with growing disquiet as each creature in turn found a host. What was going to happen now was anybody’s guess.

As the Brigadier pointed out in their *sotto voce* council of war, Max’s henchmen had been put to sleep at the moment when their one idea was to get into the castle and do as much damage to its occupants as possible. If they resumed their attack with all the power that they would gain from the N-Forms, it would be a walk-over; and the Brigadier couldn’t think of a thing to do about it. They couldn’t even

consider a tactical retreat because of the Doctor and Sarah lying there helpless and unprotected.

The two of Max's men nearest to them – the ones who still had their guns – were the last to wake up. One had a three-foot millipede with needle-sharp claws on its many feet tucked up inside him; and the other was host to a thing that was nothing but an ulcered eye, which had bounced along like an obscene football.

348

As they uncertainly regained their feet, Jeremy suddenly felt again the delicious sense of certainty he'd experienced, albeit based on a misapprehension, during the attack by the ghost.

'I know what we can do!' he whispered excitedly to the Brigadier.

'What?'

'I said I know how to fix them,' he said.

'I heard you. What can we do?'

Jeremy took a deep breath – and stopped. How could he explain that he'd got the idea out of one of Mario's children's books? Anyway, there wasn't time. If it was going to be done, they'd jolly well got to get on with it.

'I'll show you,' he said, and wriggled away on his stomach just as he'd seen James Bond and people do.

'Jeremy! Come back!' hissed the Brigadier to no avail.

Quietly reaching for a rifle from the wheelbarrow, Jeremy continued on his serpentine way, more cautiously than ever, until he was just behind the two bemused men with the guns, in the cover of a thicket of leaves.

'Where's the boss? He's split;' one of them was saying.

'So what?' the other said. 'We got our orders, don't we?'

Now where was the safety-thingy? thought Jeremy, trying to keep his breathing as quiet as possible. The 349

Brigadier had been most insistent on shoving the things on; ah, that was it.

He pulled it back and stealthily stuck the rifle out of the leaves. Peering along the sights, he could just make out in the distance the very furthest of the men, one big one and one small one, who had come out of the far woods and were standing talking together. He could see the rest of them in between, all apparently uncertain of what to do next.

Now then. He didn't want to kill him – though that was pretty silly, because if his plan worked… His mind stopped talking as he trained the gun on the shoulder of the big one's anorak.

This wasn't just aiming at a wooden duck some ten feet away. It was more like hitting it in the pupil of the eye at a hundred yards. He held his breath and pulled the trigger.

There was a horrible bang and the butt of the gun struck him a nasty blow on his shoulder.

Without looking to see if he'd scored a hit, he immediately dropped flat on the ground and lay there listening to his heart, which seemed to think it had just done the hundred yards in ten seconds flat.

The confusion of sounds which came from outside the thicket told him little, He heard again the strange noise of the energy blast and felt a rush of heat on his cheek; and smelt again the odour of roasting flesh, which somehow 350

didn't seem so appetizing as it had when he'd known he was smelling goat meat.

There was a rattle of automatic fire from one of the guns, cut short by another blast; a confusion of shouting and vicious cursing from near and far; a lot more blasting; more shouting; more blasting; and then, silence.

He stood up and peered through the leaves. He couldn't see a thing. He moved delicately sideways until he could see over the top of the clump of undergrowth. The only sign of any of Max's men was a scorched area of woodland nearby with two melted guns lying near the edge, and in the distance a plume of smoke.

'Jeremy?'

It was the Brigadier's voice. 'Jeremy? Are you all right?'

Then he saw them, as they stood up from their hiding place near the

wheelbarrow. Too excited to be able to speak, he waved furiously in their direction and caught their eye.

‘That was quite brilliant,’ said the Brigadier as they joined forces again. ‘Whatever made you think of doing that?’

‘It worked, didn’t it? It really worked. I mean, it did, didn’t it? I mean, look!’ said Jeremy, waving the gun towards the empty battlefield.

‘Groovy, man,’ said Roberto.

351

‘I’ll take that,’ said the Brigadier, relieving Jeremy of the gun and putting on the safety catch.

‘I mean, tell me. I couldn’t look, you see. I had to keep my head down.’

So the Brigadier told him. He had hit the big man right on target and knocked him over; and his partner, the small one, had seen the two standing with guns in their hands and must have jumped to the conclusion that one of them had fired the shot; and blasted him. By which time the wounded man was on his feet again and let fly at the man with the other gun, who was firing back.

Naturally enough, the bullets went wild before he too went up in flames, and someone else was wounded. In no time at all, there was a general melee in progress, with every man who was possessed by an N-Form letting loose bolts of fire *ad libitum*; and the result was there to be seen.

Not one was left. All had been wiped out, by Jeremy’s strategy and their habitual paranoid suspicion of each other, multiplied a hundredfold by the fiends in possession.

It had worked. Just like in the story. *And* he’d proved he was a good shot after all; and at last he heard the words from the Brigadier he’d dreamt of hearing for so long: ‘Well done, Jeremy!’

352

‘Who’d have thought that a classical education would come in so handy?’ said the Brigadier, as they traipsed back through the gatehouse, wheeling the barrow full of guns.

‘Oh, nothing to do with school, sir,’ said Jeremy, who was trying to explain the Greek myth his idea was based on.

‘I could never get the hang of all that alpha, beta, gamma, delta stuff; so they let me do woodwork instead, till I cut a bit of my thumb off. Look!’ and he waved it at them, with its curiously flat end.

‘No, it was in this book of your uncle’s. There was this chappie Cadmus, who sowed some teeth in the garden, dragon’s teeth they were.’

‘Seems logical,’ said the Brigadier. ‘Anybody would, wouldn’t they?’

‘Yes, sir. And they sort of took root and all that caper.

But they didn’t come up cabbages or carrots – or even dragons – they came up as a lot of fierce soldiers.’

‘Hotcha, baby,’ said Roberto, a trifle breathlessly as he was the one pushing the barrow.

‘It doesn’t seem very likely I know, sir. But that’s what it said. And Cadmus realized that if he was going to stop them killing everybody in the world he’d have to fight them all by himself; but then he had the same idea I did,

‘Great minds…’ said the Brigadier.

‘Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. I copied him. I mean, he thought of it first. He threw a stone into the middle of them, you see, and started them fighting each other and they all killed one another and all, and I thought, well, sauce for the goose, sir.’

‘And theirs was well and truly cooked.’ And then the Brigadier said it again: ‘Well done, Jeremy.’

In a way, he was glad Sarah wasn’t there, because he could feel himself blushing.

Mario met them in the great hall. ‘Aha!’ he said. ‘I catch you. Doctor is awaking.’

‘Good, good,’ said the Brigadier, feeling that maybe the tide was beginning to turn.

‘And Max Vilmio come back too.’

‘What!’

‘Not to worry. Is dead as a doorknob. You see.’

Thank the Lord for that, thought the Brigadier; and he raised no objections when his uncle insisted on conscripting Roberto (on the strength of his sublime pasta of the previous night) to come to the kitchen to help Umberto in the preparation of a celebratory feast.

If doorknobs could be considered dead, then it was a good comparison, thought the Brigadier as he knelt by the body. It had been lying on the cliff-top near the ruined wall 354

when Mario woke up from his nap, and was quite clearly as devoid of life as it was of its right arm.

The Doctor came bustling out of the TARDIS.

‘Ah, there you are, Doctor,’ said the Brigadier.

‘Am I? Now, are you quite sure about that, Lethbridge-Stewart?’ But the Brigadier didn’t react as he usually did to the Doctor’s teasing, for his attention had been caught by the largish object in the Doctor’s hands.

At first sight, it was a complex multiple helix; many spirals turned back on themselves. But it was like a drawing of an impossible object, with the perspective twisted to produce an inside-out which was at the same time downside-up. Whenever he thought he’d grasped its shape, he realized he was seeing it wrong, that it was really quite otherwise.

‘What’s that, for Pete’s sake?’ he said.

‘I just hope we don’t need the TARDIS in a hurry,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s the Space-Time Warping Template which she uses to get into the Time Vortex. The Dimensional Transducer is already lined up on the area surrounding the flaw in the barrier, so if I link the two together I can bend the N-Space boundary sufficiently to seal up the cracks.’

He switched off the Transducer. ‘That’s the theory at least,’ he said.

‘I say, Doctor,’ said Jeremy in a worried voice.

‘Not now, boy,’ said the Doctor, connecting the wires coming out of the Template to the main machine.

‘But Doctor –!’

‘You heard the Doctor, Jeremy,’ said the Brigadier.

The two pieces of equipment were joined; the Doctor made a last adjustment to the controls and put his hand on the switch. ‘Well, Lethbridge-Stewart, wish me luck,’ he said.

‘Stop!’ cried Jeremy. ‘It’s Sarah! She hasn’t woken up!’

‘What!’ said the Doctor, snatching his hand away. It was the first time in their long acquaintance that the Brigadier had seen him go pale with shock.

He hurried round into the wire cage, where Jeremy was bending anxiously over the unconscious Sarah.

‘I took it for granted that…’ he lifted her eyelids. ‘She hasn’t come back from N-Space.’ He stood up and looked at Jeremy.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘If I’d pulled that switch, the barrier would have locked solid and Sarah would never have been able to get back.

‘I should have killed her as effectively as if I’d put a bullet through her brain.’

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Sarah had no idea how she was going to lead Louisa from her long banishment, but she wasn’t worried. She knew that she was doing the right thing.

Sure enough, as soon as she took her hand and together they left the ground and flew away from the castello, they found that they were moving through the shining tunnel which she had encountered the first time she came into N-Space.

Down at the end of the tunnel was the impossibly bright light which somehow didn’t glare, but was as soft and limpid as the sunlight which filters through the ripples of a shallow sea, dappling the golden sand with a lucid, shadowless pattern.

As they neared the end of their travelling, when they were no longer floating through the air but walking hand in hand, Sarah could see

figures dressed in the fashion of an earlier time moving forward out of the brightness. She heard Louisa gasp.

‘Mama!’ she said, ‘And oh, my dear Papa!’

Letting go of Sarah’s hand, she ran forward into their welcoming arms.

More figures crowded round the returning exile; among them, Sarah could see the familiar face of Louisa’s Powly –

and recognized the features of the miniature in the bedroom: the much-loved Miss Grinley.

357

After a few moments, Louisa broke free, turned and ran back to Sarah. She threw her arms around her and hugged and hugged her. ‘Thank you my friend, my true, true friend,’ she said, pulling back and gazing at her with shining eyes.

But then a shadow flitted across her face. ‘I understand at last. I must say farewell to all my hopes. These eyes will never more behold Giuseppe…’ But she stopped speaking when she saw that Sarah was looking past her and smiling.

She turned to look. The little knot of people had parted to make a lane amidst them; and at the end of it stood the one for whom Louisa had waited so long.

She did not run. She walked to him almost reluctantly, as if fearful that he might be nothing but another hope, another memory. But then he opened his arms to her; and she was enfolded in his love.

‘Sarah.’

The quiet voice pulled her from the sight of the joy before her as the youngsters were hidden from sight by their families and friends.

‘It’s time to come back,’ said the Doctor.

‘I think I want to stay,’ said Sarah. ‘I’ve never felt so happy in my life before.’

He held out his hand.

‘Not yet,’ he said.

358

‘It’s worked,’ said the Brigadier. ‘He’s coming round.

Well, thank the Lord. All’s well that ends well.’

‘Hi there,’ said Jeremy to Sarah as she blinked open her eyes. ‘Hi,’ she said comfortably, but made no attempt to get up.

The Doctor, on the other hand, leapt to his feet and almost ran to the Transducer machine. He switched it off and hastily went to reconnect the Warping Template.

But even as he was tightening the second screw, there was a rending noise to tear the eardrums, and a flash of fire to sear the eyes. Maximilian was on his feet, and behind him, through a jagged gash of scarlet flame, poured an unending flow of fiends, filling the earth and the sky with a gallery of grotesque horror as far as the eye could see.

The Doctor reached out for the switch; but dropped his hand again.

‘Quite right, Doctor,’ boomed Maximilian. ‘Once more you are too late.’

He lifted his hand, his only hand, and pointed it at the Doctor.

‘Good-bye,’ he said.

359

Twenty-Eight

‘Stop!’ cried the Doctor. ‘I can help you!’

Maximilian did not move. ‘Help me? You who have done your best throughout the centuries to destroy me? Why should you help me now?’

Behind him, the chattering, snarling, howling cacophony coming from the mass of N-Forms died away almost as if they were listening, or maybe waiting for orders.

‘You have felt my power,’ replied the Doctor. ‘But you have defeated me. You have proved that you are the mightiest of the mighty; you are the liege lord of the world.

Would you have only serfs to rule?’

Maximilian lowered his arm.

‘Continue,’ he said.

‘You asked me once to tell you who I am. I tell you now, I am the only one living on this paltry planet who knows the secrets of the Universe. I have visited many of the inhabited worlds across the Galaxy.’

‘So?’

‘Make me your consigliere, Lord.’

A frown, an expression of doubt almost, crossed the great face as if King Maximilian found it difficult to accept 360

the reminder that he had so recently been Max Vilmio of the Mafia.

‘What’s he doing?’ hissed Jeremy. ‘He’s not really changing sides, is he?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ whispered Sarah.

‘Quiet, both of you!’ said the Brigadier through his teeth.

‘Why should I give you my confidence?’

‘You are powerful, Majesty. There is nobody to challenge your might on the puny world of Earth. But in the Galaxy –’

He’s done it again, thought the Brigadier. He s trying to make him feel small!

Maximilian was angry. ‘I am the Emperor!’ he said. ‘I am the Lord of All!’

The Doctor shook his head regretfully. ‘Just as the Godfathers share amongst the Families the territory they control, the Lords of the Galaxy have parcelled out the worlds they rule. I’m afraid that you’ll have to come to terms with it – and with them. I can –’

Again the giant man interrupted. ‘Never! The Supreme Being of this great Earth shall never bend his knee to another. Are they invulnerable, these so-called lords?’

‘This is why you need me by your side, Master. You need my knowledge and my advice.’

361

Maximilian smiled contemptuously. ‘Advise me then, Doctor.’ The word sounded like an insult. ‘Why should Maximilian not become the Emperor of the Galaxy, of the Universe?’

Only the Brigadier, who knew him so well, could have recognized the flicker of satisfaction in the Doctor’s eyes.

‘You do not have the power.’

‘What!’

‘Just now, you could have killed me with one blast from your finger. I tell you, there are those beyond the skies who could incinerate the Earth with a look.’

For a moment it seemed that Maximilian was nonplussed. But then his face cleared.

‘If you wish to see my power, look around you. You tell me I need more?’

With an imperious gesture he summoned the nearest of the N-Forms, a savage creature with the hide of an alligator but having the body and the teeth of a jaguar. It crawled up to Maximilian crouched low on its belly snarling and spitting.

‘Come,’ he said.

With a hair-raising roar, the creature leapt upon him.

But instead of knocking him to the ground, or burying its fangs in his unprotected throat, it melted into his body and was gone.

362

‘You see?’ he said to the Doctor and beckoned to another of the fiends.

‘No, Lord!’ said the Doctor, anxiously. ‘You don know what you are doing!’

‘Do I not, little man?’ said Maximilian as the amoeba-like jelly swarmed up his leg to vanish as the other N-Form had.

He turned to the waiting multitudes of fiends and lifted his arm. ‘Come, good sirs. Your Lord awaits you. Why do you tarry?’

At his words, they started to swarm forward. He turned back to the Doctor, his face full of arrogance.

‘Have the Kings of the Galaxy such power as this?’ he cried.

At first the N-Forms melted into his body one by one, but soon, as they neared Maximilian, they were melding with each other, becoming a tongue of fire which licked at his body and merged into it, with a furnace roar. As the pressure of the power that his body was assimilating grew, so did he. As if to make room for the evil which was flowing into him, the giant figure was becoming ever larger.

‘I beg you,. Majesty,’ said the Doctor, shrinking back against the Dimensional Transducer, ‘stop this madness. No human frame, not even one which has the elixir of 363

immortality running in its veins, none could survive it.’ His voice was full of panic.

Maximilian ignored him.

‘You see?’ he was shouting in triumph. ‘You see? I am the Emperor! None shall withstand my might! My glory shall fill the Universe and put the stars to shame! Bow down ye mortals and pay homage to your Lord!’

The last flame flickered into his body, which was now some seventy feet tall, a very Gulliver of evil.

He stretched his one good arm up high and cried out to the silent sky: ‘I am Maximilian!’

‘Good-bye,’ murmured the Doctor, and pulled the switch.

When Sarah tried to remember afterwards exactly what happened then, she found it difficult to focus her thoughts.

Certainly there was some sort of explosion, one which deafened the mind rather than the ears. The flash of light which hit the eyes and obscured the sight left no after-glare.

Yet when it cleared and all that could be seen was the sky and the sea and the earth, it seemed for a long shimmering moment that the whole of creation had been shaken by the passing of Maximilian.

‘I did warn him,’ said the Doctor mildly as he switched off the

machine.

364

‘Look,’ he added. ‘A bonus. The flaw in the barrier has closed up.’ Sure enough, the monstrous bloody gash in the sky through which the N-Forms had come had vanished.

‘But what happened?’ asked the Brigadier. ‘I could see that you were teasing him into taking those things on board, but what then?’

‘I thought it was game, set and match to the Jolly old Emperor,’ said Jeremy.

‘Oh ye of little faith,’ said Sarah. ‘Do you think the Doctor didn’t know what he was doing?’

‘I’m not so sure,’ said the Brigadier.

‘How well you know me, Lethbridge-Stewart,’ said the Doctor with a twinkle. ‘You’re quite right. It could have gone disastrously wrong if I’d mistimed things.’

He started to disconnect the Warping Template.

‘Just think what was going on inside him,’ he went on.

‘A veritable torrent of power pouring in; a literal pandemonium of negativity and evil; his mind, his body –

his whole being – teetering on the edge of chaos. It’s possible that it might have been too much for him anyway, just as I told him.

‘But dynamic conditions like that can crystallize into an ordered structure in a moment. It’s the way the world is built. And if that had happened, I might have been the agent 365

in constructing a monster the like of which the Universe has never seen.

‘So I thought I’d better give him a bit of a push by twisting his Space-Time – remember, he was standing right where I’d aimed the Warping Template. And over the edge he went.’

He took hold of the strange spiral construction, which seemed to move in his hand as he picked it up, and marched off to the TARDIS with a youthful spring in his step.

He doesn't look a day over six hundred, thought Sarah.

A feast it was. Umberto, Mario and Roberto had filled the big table in the great hall with all sorts of Italian and Sicilian goodies. There was pasta aplenty, of course, all differently shaped and sauced; smoked ham, salami, mortadella and five other sorts of sausage; tiny grilled sardines; roasted leg of lamb and stuffed kid (which Sarah couldn't bring herself to eat), with peppers cooked to a crisp, and aubergine and fennel; cheeses galore; and if you hadn't filled up to the brim on almond tartlets and zabaglione you could add a layer of peach or apricot.

'I like to give a piece of toast,' said Mario, lifting his glass when everybody had finished eating (except Jeremy, who was on his third helping of zabaglione washed down with a fifth glass of sweet sparkling spumante). 'I drink to 366

all of you all, in saying thank you for you saying good-bye to my enemy who I shot. One potato, two potato and out he must go. Si? Little devils likeways. But especial to my good Alistair, for cause he bring you here and will be Barone when I peg it. Hear, hear.'

He took a large swig of his Marsala and sat down to a round of applause.

The Brigadier cleared his throat and spoke gruffly, without looking up. 'Yes, well…' he said. 'I've been meaning to say something about that.'

Mario looked up brightly and leant forward eagerly.

'Si?' he said.

The Brigadier stared into his glass. 'It's just that…' He looked up and caught Mario's eye. 'Never mind. It's nothing,' he said gloomily, sighed and tossed back the rest of his brandy.

Poor Brig, thought Sarah. He'd got too much sense of duty for his own good.

Roberto picked up his guitar, which was sitting by his chair like a pet dog waiting for titbits, and quietly began to sing 'Love Me Tender' under his breath.

'There's one thing I'd like to know, Doctor,' Sarah said, partly to fill the rather embarrassing silence and partly because she really did want to know.

367

‘And what’s that, my dear good journalist?’ said the Doctor, affably.

She grinned. He was always teasing her about her propensity for interviewing people. ‘The whole object of the exercise in the first place was to stop all the evil bursting out of N-Space. You seemed to think it would be the biggest catastrophe the world had ever faced.’

‘Quite right.’

‘And yet you just let it scatter into space. Where is it now?’

‘At a rough guess, halfway to the moon,’ he answered.

‘You see, the danger was from the concentration of negativity. A burst dam is a disaster to the people in the valley below, but more water flows from the mouth of the Amazon river in a day than a thousand dams could contain.

But it’s all safely dispersed into the ocean.’

‘And a jolly good thing too,’ said Jeremy, with a wise nod.

‘I see,’ said Sarah, wondering why her mood had suddenly changed. From feeling relieved, contented, relaxed she now found herself puzzled, fearful, sad. Then it came to her. Roberto had changed from his Elvis mode and unbelievably was singing in a pure sweet voice the very song Guido had been singing in the garden, the song of the wanderer pining for his lost love.

368

‘What song is that?’ she said, when it came to its last sad cadence.

‘A folk song, I guess you’d call it,’ answered Roberto.

‘I got it off of my Paw.’

She looked at him. It couldn’t be. Surely not. And yet…

‘Excuse me,’ she said, jumped from her chair and shot from the hall.

‘There! Look! Look everybody!’ she commanded the astonished company as she held up beside Roberto’s face the small portrait of Guido she had grabbed from the wall of the gallery near Mario’s room.

There was no doubt of it. If you ignored the difference between Roberto's oiled quiff and the long bob of the Renaissance, they could have been twins.

'But don't you see,' she said, when she'd told the whole story, 'you're a real genuine long-lost heir! If you're the descendant of Guido, you're even more entitled than Signor Verconti himself!

'Oh, sorry,' she added, realizing that she'd gone way beyond the bounds that politeness demanded of her.

But she needn't have worried: Mario was jiggling up and down with delight, and running his hands through his hair until It looked like a washing-up brush. 'Vodeo do,' he 369

said, excitedly, misremembering his music slang to the tune of some fifty years.

The Brigadier, who was of course the one who would be most affected by the outcome of Sarah's surprising suggestion, said, 'But if he's descended through the male line he'd have to bear the name of Verconti himself.'

Roberto was looking from one to the other as they spoke as if the world had gone mad.

'What is your second name, Roberto?' went on the Brigadier.

'Orazio,' he replied.

'Well, that's it then,' said the Brigadier, obviously downcast.

The Doctor intervened. 'I don't think so,' he said.

'What is your *last* name?'

'Oh, my last name? Menestrello.'

'And that means "minstrel",' said the Doctor.

It was all sorted out in the end.

Once the Brigadier had at last made it clear to his uncle that given the chance of becoming the Barone of a small island off the coast of Sicily he would be only too glad to pass; and Mario had pointed out that it wasn't a real title as such and he could leave the castello and its land to whoever he pleased; and Roberto had been prevailed upon to call

cousin, and they had all embraced in the time-honoured Italian way, much to the Brigadier's acute embarrassment, there was very little else to do but open another bottle of bubbly.

And to think I was worried about Garcia O'Toole's having an Auntie in Scunthorpe, thought Sarah.

Connections! What with coincidence, synchronicity, serendipity, astrology and alchemy (with a dollop of Taoism thrown in), there'd been enough connections to fill one of Ann Radcliffe's three-volume novels.

All at once a burden was lifted. She wasn't a fiction writer at all. The Doctor was quite right: she was a journalist. She was just too fascinated by all the improbable things that went on in the real world to be anything else.

First thing in the morning she'd give Clorinda a ring.

Had she got a story this time!